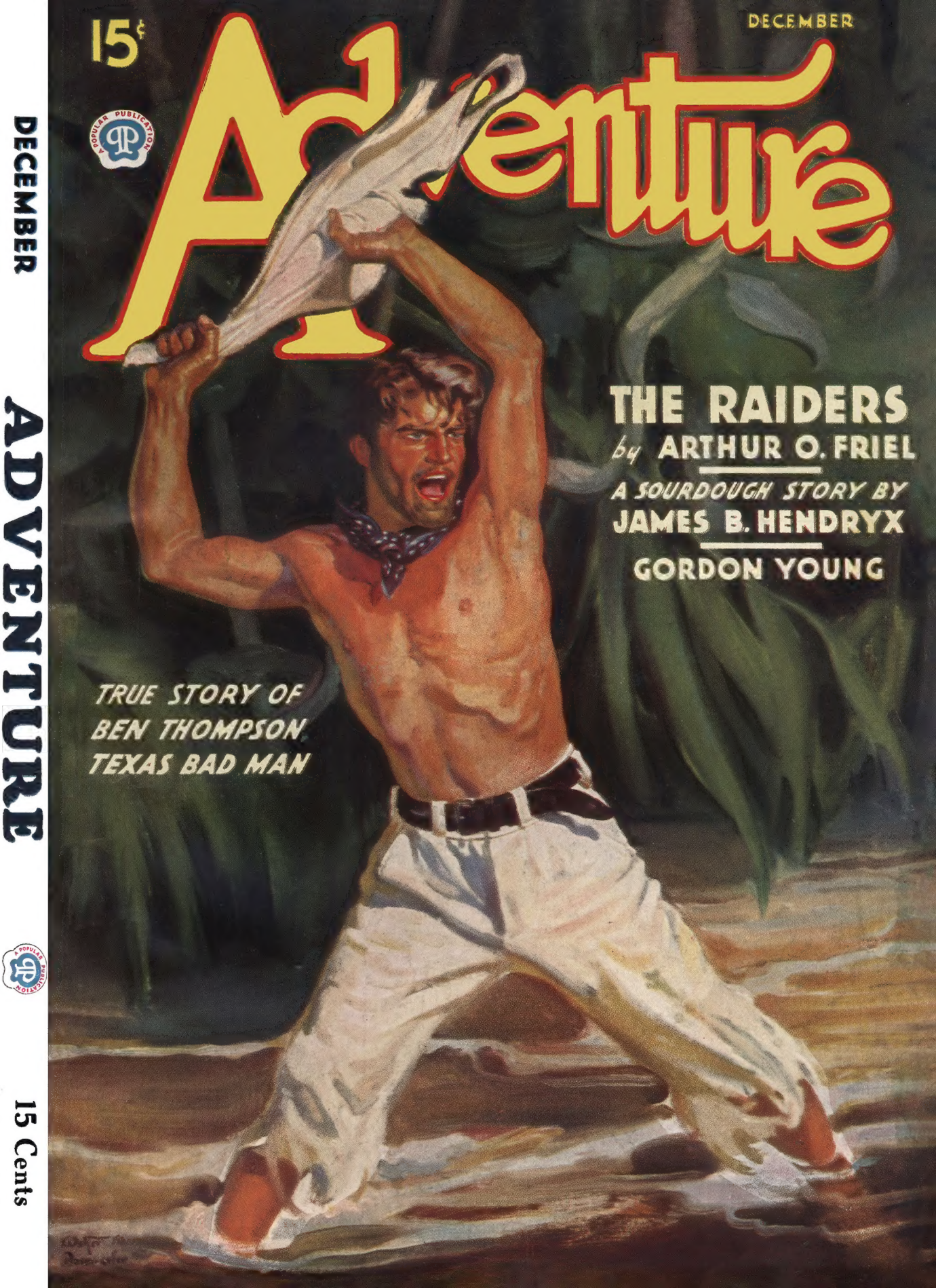
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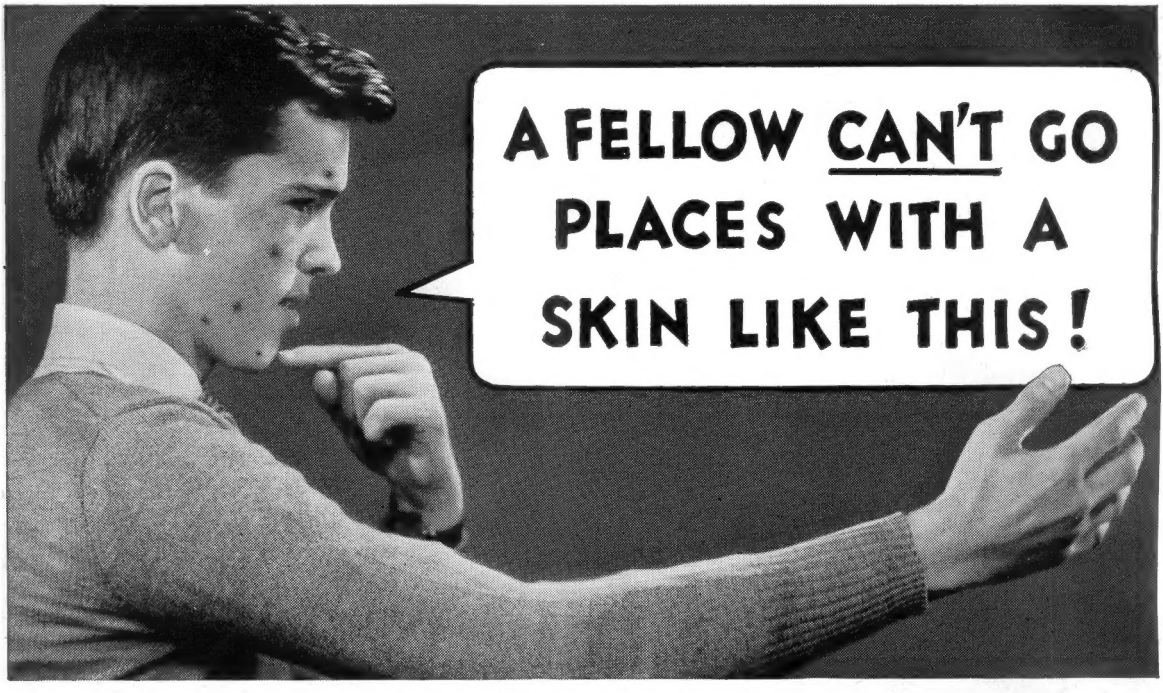

But Pete is soon pimple-free and "out stepping"

HELLO, UNCLE JACK.—WHAT ABOUT YOU AND AUNT MARGE AND ME SEEING A MOVIE TONIGHT?
SURE—IF YOU LIKE. I THOUGHT YOU'D BE STEPPING OUT WITH SUE, THOUGH!

NOT WITH THESE BRIGHT NEW BLOSSOMS ON MY FACE!!
PIMPLES? LISTEN TO ME, BOY—WHEN I WAS YOUR AGE, I CLEARED UP MY SKIN WITH FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST. GIVE IT A TRY

Don't let adolescent pimples make a hermit out of YOU!

Between the ages of 13 and 25, important glands develop. This causes disturbances throughout the body. Waste poisons get into the blood and irritate the skin, making it break out in pimples.

But you can clear skin irritants out of your blood—with Fleischmann's Yeast. Then the pimples disappear! Eat 3 cakes of Fleischmann's Yeast a day, before meals, until skin clears.

—clears the skin

by clearing skin irritants out of the blood

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Vol. 94, No. 2 December, 1935

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Howard V. L. Bloomfield, Editor

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THE RAIDERS

by Arthur O. Friel

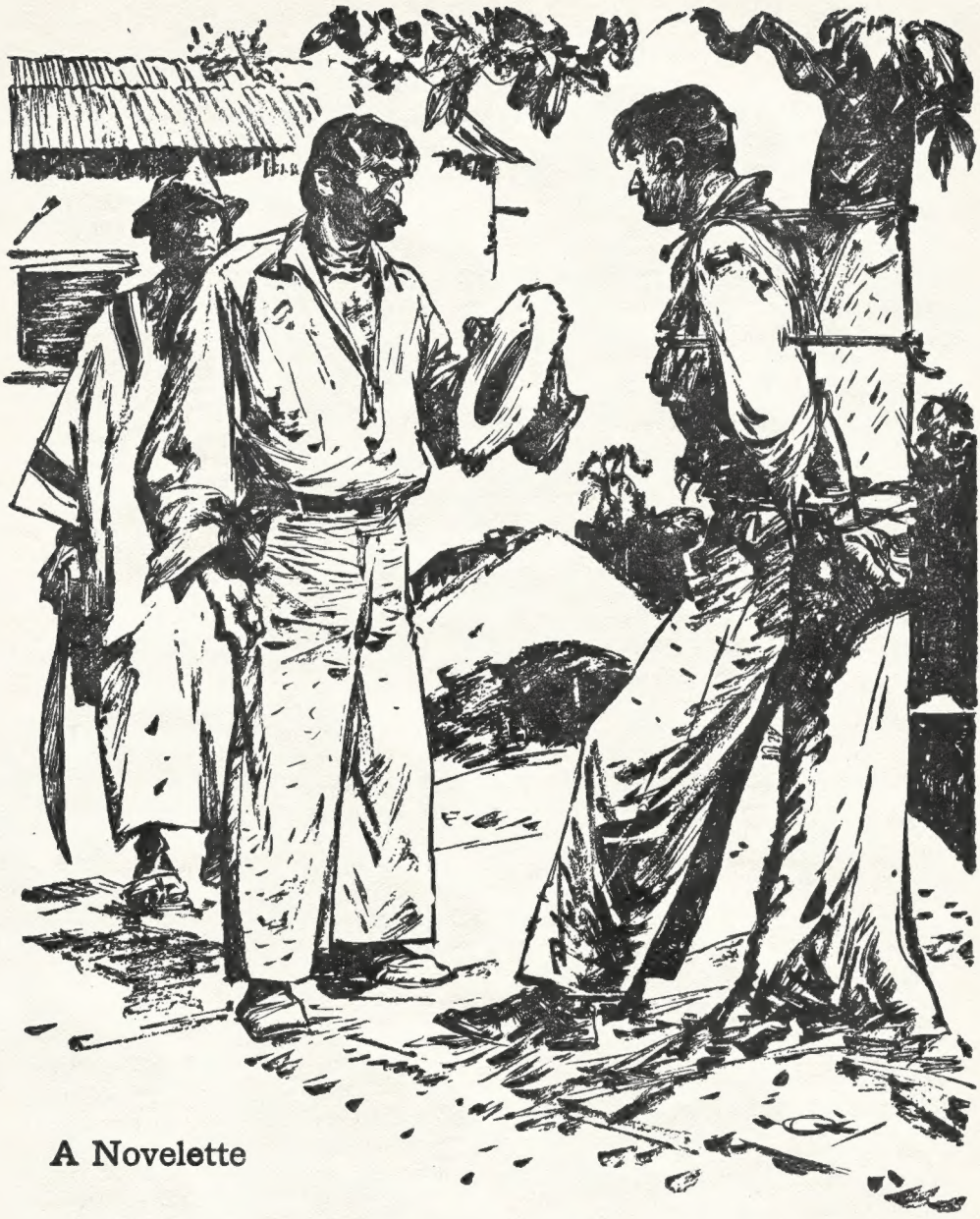
CHAPTER I

A MAN FALLS

A MAN stood on the yellow shore of the yellow river, waving a white flag.

Out upon the tawny water, half a mile from the land, a sailing *piragua* surged against the current.

Down on the lone man, the little ship, and the broad stream beat the brassy blaze of midforenoon, tempered some-



A Novelette

what by lusty wind. Under the impetus of that wind the river heaved in long rollers, the vessel's broad squaresail bulged, the man's dark hair stood awry on his hatless head. Yet the blue veil of heat-mist dwelling ever on the limitless flat *llanos* across the water hung unmoved by the rush of air, curtaining any highlands which might, far west, tower from the monotonous plains.

Over there, fading into dim distance, lay Colombia. Here at the east, rising in rough hills which grew into rougher mountains, was Venezuela. And this rolling Rio Orinoco between them was any man's river, no man's river, bearing on its broad back whatever might manage to ride there, callously swallowing whatever might fall to its voracious maw; mightier than any man or nation of

men, contemptuous of all. Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief, all were alike to the giant stream, and on it or in it all might travel or die.

Rich men, however, seldom faced the discomforts and dangers of the watery road to the hinterland. Poor men, thievish men, desperate men often did, trusting the swirling waters little, the human flotsam less. And this man waving the white cloth looked both poor and desperate, while those on the *piragua* seemed distrustful. Although his signaling grew more strenuous, the craft sailed on.

Panting, gritting his teeth, the man ceased his effort. The cloth sank, dangled from a tanned fist, became a limp sleeveless undershirt. The rumpled head drooped, the bloodshot eyes blurred, the shoulders sagged with despair. Through his teeth came hoarse denunciation of the aloof watchers:

"Damn you! Oh, damn you!"

Turning then, he shambled toward a clump of low hardwood trees a few rods from the waterside. His heels dragged, and his body visibly swayed. Of a sudden he stumbled and pitched headlong to the hot earth. For a second he struggled to rise; then, slumping, stayed down.

A gust of wind swooped at the dropped undershirt, skittered it along the ground, flung it against a spiky thorn bush. The torrid sun hurled its full force on the helpless shape sprawled on the baked clay, sending its piercing rays through cloth and flesh to the very vitals. Weakly moving, the prone figure drew into a huddle, shielding head and neck with outspread hands; then lay again quiet, breathing short, suffering in silence.

Out on the water the indifferent vessel swerved from its course. The square-sail swung to a new cant, the triangular sheet aft drew somewhat inboard, and the broad hull plowed athwart the current, riding clumsily atilt, yet under firm control. At the stubby prow clustered men peering fixedly at the fallen signaler on shore and the green blot of trees beyond him. Save for the slap and slash of waves against the beam, the heavy craft approached in silence. At length a voice drawled a quiet command. Helmsmen far aft heaved at the tiller; the vessel stopped short, laid aback. Slapping, squeaking, the mainsail descended. Plunging overside, an anchor gripped bottom. And into a dugout canoe trailing astern dropped four men with paddles. Before they loosed the painter, other men passed down rifles.

Still nobody hailed the man on the ground; and still he lay heedless, as if deaf or dead. With swift, short strokes the canoe swam to the shelving shore; and with quick but wary strides the riflemen advanced to the huddled figure. Six feet away, all halted, eyeing him dubiously. One spoke:

"*Enfermo.* Sick."

"*Sí.* But with what?" said another. "Hi, *hombre! Qué tiene?* What ails you?"

The gruff question penetrated. The lax neck stiffened, the hands jerked away, the uncombed head lifted and stared, incredulous. Ears dulled by pain, mind torpid with hopelessness, the sufferer either had not heard or had not believed the noises of the arriving *piragua.* Now, scowling in the sun-glare, he sat up slowly, making no response.

"Not smallpox, *gracias á Dios,*" assured another native, scanning the unspotted face.

"*Fiebre.* Fever," judged the first. Abruptly he stepped forward, gripped the upturned head, let go. "*Sí!* He burns. A veritable *calentura,* hot as hell. And in this sun— *Cra!* Come, *hombre!* Up with you!"

Grasping a shoulder, he tugged. The sick man's scowl deepened.

"Hands off!" he snapped in Spanish. "I can stand alone!"

And, with a scrambling struggle, he

gained footing and arose—only to stagger and turn sickly white.

"Ho! *Sí*, you can stand alone!" jeered his helper, steadying him. "Next week, perhaps! Now— Manuel, *aquí!* Hold him while I investigate."

Another man, short but broad, stepped forward as the speaker turned away; and, gripping the sick man's belt with one brawny fist, dug warning knuckles into his lower ribs. In that casual clutch was power enough, if exerted, to yank the thankless sufferer off his legs and toss him ten feet away. Standing still, glad enough of the strong support, the rescued man eyed the others, then swung his gaze to the *piragua*. There, waiting, stood at least twenty more men, filling the short deck, intently watching; men in yellow straw sombreros and faded bluish clothes, against which dully gleamed grayish rifle-barrels held loosely ready.

The boss of the small landing party, with his other companions, advanced to the trees. There the three drew apart, scouted around the short grove, entered it. Presently they reappeared, walking negligently, carrying several articles of camp equipment: small green tent, hammock, light blanket, iron kettle, cooking tripod (a flat metal ring on short legs); also a white solar helmet and a bolt-action rifle. That was all. No bag, box, basket, or other container of small personal articles was there. Nor any food.

Now, pausing beside the sick man, the leader put the helmet on the hot head and critically eyed his features: dark brows, brown eyes, prominent nose, straight mouth, square chin bristly with severals days' beard: a countenance possibly Spanish but probably not. Bluntly the native quizzed:

"*Inglés? Norteamericano?*"

"*Americano,*" replied the alien, standing straighter.

"*Del norte!* Of the North! We also are Americans! *Del sur!* Of the South!"

With which rebuke the rifleman hailed the boat:

"*Capitán*, it is a foreigner, totally alone, with fever and no food, calling himself American. No sign of other men is here. Shall he come aboard?"

From the deck answered a crisp voice:

"*Prontamente*. At once!"

At once the four moved. The fifth, grasping Manuel's thick wrist, commanded:

"Let go! I walk alone!"

And, after a probing look, the stocky gunman loosed his hold. The Northerner made good his assertion. Neck stiff, head high, step resolute, he marched forward unaided, meanwhile tucking in the khaki shirt which hitherto had hung loose outside his brown trousers. Into Manuel's watchful gaze flitted a cool gleam of semi-respect. This unknown alien had pride and bore himself like a man.

From the deck came again the authoritative voice:

"Get that white cloth!"

One of the four, turning aside, strode to the neglected undershirt and disentangled it from the thorn bush. Then all boarded the canoe.

Sitting amidships, the North American held himself rigidly erect until the dugout swung under the overhanging *piragua* stern. There, attempting to stand and vault aboard, he swayed in the bobbing small boat and nearly toppled overside. Strong hands grabbed him. Others reached down from above. Hoisted and hauled, he went up with a scramble and, released, fell to hands and knees, while his helmet dropped off with a hollow bump on the deck. Voices tittered. Then mirth died as another voice snapped:

"*Silencio! Señor*, allow me!"

A hand, rather small but strong-looking, met the angry upward gaze of the chagrined stranger; and, above it, a firm-jawed face with sallow skin, black mus-

tache and brows, and eyes oddly blue: dark blue, almost black, yet by no means inky; eyes shrewdly penetrating, but sympathetic. The man himself was short, slender, almost fragile in appearance, but somehow suggestive of wiry endurance. And the Northerner who had found the heavy paw of Manuel irksome readily met the friendly hand of the evident commander. With a quick tug he was lifted, to stand now looking down, overtopping his volunteer assistant by half a head.

"El sombrero!" curtly added his helper.

Some one again picked up the dropped helmet, set it on the foreigner's head with deft touch. Forthwith the commander led his protégé forward, all others making way. At a gesture, men began hauling up the anchor, while others stepped to the halyards.

Amid orderly disorder and controlled confusion of hurrying men and flapping sails and squeaking blocks and grumbling tiller the *piragua* drifted, swung, heeled, surged again across thumping waves, steadied once more into full speed upstream. And in the scant but sufficient shade cast by the bulging foresail the man burned by sun and sickness sat, suddenly cool, on a canvas camp-chair. Beside him the commander stood eyeing him anew; then said:

"My name, *señor*, is Torre. Not that it matters. But since we may travel together for a day or two—"

He paused. The other briefly responded:

"Steele."

"Ah. Señor Steele. It is a name new to me. But we shall talk later. Now you will excuse me a little while."

And, thus tactfully leaving him to rest, the captain returned aft. There he stood peering down-river, eyes tight, mouth thin, as if seeking a following sail. Finding none, he conversed briefly with the men who had gone ashore; then inspected the stranger's belongings, lingering on two articles—the white undershirt and the rifle.

On the garment he read the collar-tab bearing the manufacturer's trade-mark, indisputably American; and as he dropped it he smiled oddly. On the rifle also he read the name of the makers, likewise American; and, balancing the piece on one palm, he eyed it admiringly. Short, rather small-bored, gracefully tapering from walnut butt to ramp front sight, it was a beautifully refined weapon, not common in the United States, rare indeed in Latin America; and the thickness of the breech mechanism testified to high power, flat trajectory, deadly accuracy at short or long range. For a moment the dark blue eyes grew distinctly covetous. Then, again expressionless, Torre quietly drew back the bolt.

The magazine was empty. A finger, inserted and withdrawn, brought a smudge proving that since the last shots had been fired the gun had remained uncleaned. With a nod he closed the piece and laid it again on the heap of tent-cloth. And to the attentive men who had grouped around him he said:

"The man speaks truth. He is North American; and newly come. This white flag—" he chuckled "—is not that of revolt, and our fear that we might meet bold bad *revolucionarios* was needless. We must grow more courageous, *compañeros!*"

His chuckle was echoed by a deep chorus of mirth. Even when he had walked away, recurrent rumbles indicated enjoyment of his joke. But none replied with a counter-jest. Respect for their leader evidently forbade familiarity. Laying their guns aside, the soldierly fellows squatted or sprawled at random along the deck, incurious, loosely awaiting whatever might next come about. And, as time goes on the clockless Orinoco, their wait was not long.

CHAPTER II

A MAN RISES

ONCE more Steele was burning, this time in a veritable hell-hole. Although he lay in shadow, around him pressed the baking heat of an airless oven; and from time to time malignant demons poured down his throat a scalding dose of molten iron. Fighting against these tormentors, he only redoubled the agony of his aching head, which some unseen fiend had split with a red-hot ax. Iron hands held him powerless, gripping his fists and feet and jaw while a master demon forced each new draught of steaming metal past his teeth: a demon with no body, but with a huge sallow head whence bulged merciless blue-black eyes. And each time this diabolical creature finished its cruelty it told him he must sweat!

Sweat? He was sweating blood! He must be! He was—

Something seemed to break. The intolerable heat diminished. The pain gradually subsided; his cleft head grew together, his burning eyes cooled and cleared, his baking body became merely warm—and wet. Sweat, real sweat was gushing from every pore, flowing out of him in a drenching flood—or so it seemed. He grew very weak, yet wondrously comfortable and content, lapsing into a drowse which became complete unconsciousness. And when the devils came again into his oven he knew nothing of them, and they did nothing to him. The master demon, whose head really was neither bloated nor bodiless, murmured approval; and, after wrapping the sleeper again in his blanket, went quietly away with his subordinates. And for a long time Steele slept.

A new day brought him back to life. Somewhere close by, birds squawked or briefly sang, and farther away some beast vented raucous howls. Above his head, human feet padded about on planks; feet without shoes, trampling without hard sounds. He lay in a darksome cavern of wood, ending in a curtain of blankets, between which streaked narrow rays of bright sun. At that moment the curtain parted, admitting a stocky shape which advanced peering, then grinned amicably.

"*Buen' dia'!*" greeted the corporal of the landing squad. *Cómo 'sá 'ste'?* How are you?"

"Starving," croaked Steele. "And perishing with thirst."

"Ha! *Bueno!* We shall see to it. As for drink— Perhaps some hot lemonade, *sí?*"

"Ugh!" Steele gagged. Now that the corporal spoke of it, his mouth seemed sour with lemon, his stomach saturated with it. The other guffawed.

"No more *limones, señor? Cra,* that is surprising! You should love them—they alone have broken your fever. Much lemon, very hot and strong—most delicious, no? Well, then—"

"*Agua!*" Steele's voice cracked in an angry yell. "Water! Cold! Quick! You snickering ape—"

He struggled up out of his hammock. The teaser sobered.

"Careful!" he cautioned. "Water at once, *sí.* Wait but a moment. Hi, Frasco! Fetch water, *muy pronto!* Sit down, *señor!*"

But Steele, wabbly but determined, advanced to the curtain and, as the corporal gave way, through it. Sunshine struck down, bright, but not blinding; sunshine spraying through green foliage overhead. The curving walls of wood, the bales of stuff piled near, the square opening above, told Steele he was in the hold of the *piragua;* and the sunlit boughs and lack of motion testified to anchorage somewhere off the main river.

Faces suddenly appeared, rimming the open hatchway, looking down into the haggard countenance of the resurrected stranger recently entombed in darkness. Voices grunted in surprise; the hurry call

for water had aroused thoughts of an impending death rather than a reviving life. As Steele stood grim and gaunt, eyeing the hatch as if about to attempt a vault to upper air, Captain Torre broke through the cordon, gazed a second, then commanded:

"No, *señor!* Do not try it! Down, some of you men, and assist!"

At once several of them slithered over the edge and down. In another moment the Northerner rose smoothly in a dozen hands, stepped on deck, and flatly repeated:

"*Agua!* I want water!"

"You shall have it," chuckled Torre. "You should stay in bed another day, but if you will come up how can we prevent you? Now—*Aquí, hombre,* with that water!"

A lanky young fellow bearing a sizable gourd and an agate cup approached and poured a gurgling stream. Torre narrowly inspected the cupful before allowing it to be passed; then warned:

"Not too much at once, *señor.* It is but creek water. And soon we shall have a better drink for you."

"No more lemons!" grated Steele, seizing the cup. The clear, cool water vanished down his throat in swift gulps, and his eyes fastened again on the gourd. Torre half grinned, half frowned, then grew curt:

"And no more water—now."

At a gesture the lanky youth drew back and disappeared beyond his companions. Torre himself walked away, leaving Steele glowering. After a moment the Northerner's legs felt weak, and he abruptly sat down, legs hanging down the hatch. For some little time thereafter he remained alone, apparently ignored by the natives, who went about various small businesses on deck or ate frugal breakfasts on shore, a few yards from the ship side. Over them and their vessel Steele's gaze drifted with sluggish attention and some speculation.

The *piragua,* an excellent craft evidently rather new, strong-hulled, stout-masted, lay in a slow black creek between walls of dense tropic growth, which, spreading high overhead, enclosed it in sun-streaked shadow. Upstream, downstream, the same mass of verdure blocked all view of the inland terrain and of the outer Orinoco. At the port beam a wide shelving rock slanted gently up from the water, and on this bare space burned several small breakfast fires, each with its squatting cook and its little group of eaters. The wood feeding each blaze was so dry as to be virtually smokeless. And, while Steele watched, a couple of men took rifles and departed toward the river, whence promptly came two others, likewise armed, to eat their own *desayuno.*

Ship hidden, fires imperceptible, sentries out, all others quiet, the camp obviously was secret, almost stealthy. Yet there was no atmosphere of furtive skulking. Men moved freely, hummed low-toned ditties, chuckled over little jokes, bore themselves with the unconcern of old campaigners. Whatever had been their captain's reason for taking cover through the night, they evidently feared nothing. And, although their uniforms were but blue jeans, palm-strip hats, and cheap sandals or no footgear at all, while their worn rifles were ordinary lever-action repeaters with long tubular magazines, they seemed more military than some small-town garrisons farther down river. When disorders break out along the Orinoco, such garrisons usually are composed of local men wearing whatsoever shirt and pants they happen to have and carrying the same old type of gun, temporarily put into their hands by the village *jefe.*

Now from the crude *piragua* galley, far aft, came the lanky waterbearer, this time fetching a small steaming kettle. His grin brought a scowl to Steele's face and another sour taste to his mouth. But at sight and smell of the hot liquid within the pot the Northerner's ill-nature van-

ished. Instead of the hated lemon juice, the black bowl held appetizing broth.

Without a word the youth clanked the vessel down beside the *señor* and padded away. Dipping his cup, Steele sipped eagerly, yet slowly; for the drink was very hot. And it was rich with nourishment; drink and food in one. When at length he had emptied the kettle he felt new-born.

Meanwhile the Latins had finished their more solid breakfasts and come aboard—all but one. He, stepping from one to another of the small fires, laid on each a stick or two of dry fuel; then, entering the canoe, paddled away downstream, carrying with him no gun, but two extra paddles. As Steele eyed the fires thus uselessly replenished, a quiet voice asked:

"Do you understand that, *señor*?"

Beside him again stood Torre, eyeing him quizzically, nodding toward the small flames. Steele nodded in turn.

"I've seen it done," he replied. "Up in my country it would be a crime to leave camp-fires burning, but I understand that down here it's the custom, as an offering to Santa Clara—she's the saint of fair weather, isn't she?—and also to bring good luck at hunting."

His voice now was an easy, good-humored drawl, far different from the strained rasp of his previous utterances.

"Exactly," agreed Torre. "A custom of the rivers, and a harmless one, since no green timber here will burn. And we desire both good weather and good hunting luck."

With which he again departed to issue some new order. The Northerner, pondering the statement, felt a small thrill of excitement. Good hunting luck? Hunting what? Obviously, men! And, apparently, men whom the hunters, hiding here overnight, meant to meet only at their own chosen time. Steele, face hardening, muttered:

"That goes double. If luck will only lead me to the sneaks *I* want—"

His fists clenched, and he scowled broodingly toward the Orinoco.

The boat now was getting under weigh. Hauled up by sheer muscle, the anchor bumped over the prow. Men equipped with long poles lined each side, pressing against shore or bottom, pushing with slow strength, guiding their craft downstream. Sluggishly she floated astern, gathering gentle momentum, creeping around a curve amid the greenery. Soon the natural tunnel opened into a blaze of sunlight and a windy expanse of water, where waited the canoe and, in it, the two sentries and the unarmed paddler. When the ship had fully backed out these nimbly scrambled aboard, tied the tender, and stood at ease. With swift skill their mates swung the keelless craft under small sail, then, at safe depth, hoisted all canvas.

Once more the river was rolling and flashing in the sun, the *piragua* was bowling along fast and free, and nowhere in sight was another vessel. Once more Steele sat forward in the shade of the squaresail, unshaven, unkempt, hollow-eyed, thin-cheeked, yet a much different man. And once more Torre was beside him, this time to stay awhile. Lolling in his camp chair, while his Northern companion slumped comfortably on a bale of stuff brought up from the hold, the captain gazed ahead, scanning alternately the hulking hills of Venezuela and the low-lying monotony of river growth which was Colombia; a scene apparently as devoid of human life as before the creation of man, but, at far scattered intervals, holding virtually invisible human plantations and, long leagues apart, little hamlets ranking as towns. Presently his eyes moved sidewise to the lean profile at his right, and in them grew an impish light of mirth. When he spoke Steele gaped, dumfounded.

Spanish words, Spanish inflection, Spanish accent were gone. Instead came throaty tones and familiar idioms of the far-off U. S. A.:

"Well, buddy, what d'yuh say? You're a likely lookin' fella, just the kind we're lookin' for. And yuh ain't workin' just now, are yuh? Good eats, steady pay, chances o' promotion, nothin' to worry about, and a girl in every port, includin' red-heads, if yuh like 'em hot. Come on, join the navy and see the woild!"

CHAPTER III

THE CAPTAIN

"WHAT the devil—"

Steele's amazed ejaculation evoked from Torre an explosive laugh, brief but heartfelt. With another change of tone the Southerner then teased, in conversational English:

"As a recruiting sergeant I'm not too bad, eh? And as a recruit you might fit into our outfit—if you could find your own cartridges. Your rifle's not quite the standard arm in this region."

His enunciation now was that of a cultured American, his air that of idle banter, yet suggestive of possible willingness to discuss his proposition seriously. The other, recovering himself, laughed it off.

"Thanks, but I have a job."

"Ah. With good pay?"

"M-m-m, well, maybe."

Steele's gaze grew momentarily dubious, drifting away up-river as if seeking something there, far ahead, not yet in sight. Then, turning back:

"I'm looking for a fellow."

"Ah." Torre's tone seemed a trifle cooler. "You are a detective, working for a reward?"

"Oh no!" The Northerner frowned. "I'm no professional trailer—or jailer. It's a personal matter. A family matter, in fact. He's a cousin of mine, named Steele, too. Harrison Steele. I'm Rodney. Sons of brothers. We even look somewhat alike; same general build, and about the same age."

He paused, eyeing Torre, who looked pensive, then shook his head.

"I don't recall any such man," said the captain. "The name is not familiar, nor any face just like yours. Yet somehow I have once or twice had the feeling of having seen you, or some one much like you, somewhere else. Perhaps I have. You are not an extraordinary type, even in this country."

"No, that's true. And you've evidently been in the States, too."

"Much," nodded Tore. "My schooling was American. In fact, my mother was American."

"Oh, I see." Steele contemplated the steady, dark blue eyes, awaited further disclosures, but received none. "Now that I think of it, your name's not unknown up there; only it's spelled with a *y*—Torrey."

"Yes. An Anglicized branch, perhaps. *Quién sabe?* Torre is old Spanish; originally 'de la Torre', meaning 'of the tower'. Don't ask me what tower—I've forgotten." Another brief laugh. "But this man Steele, Harrison Steele—No, that means nothing to me. You expected to find him somewhere up this river?"

"That's my object." The Northerner hesitated a moment, again regarding the officer sidelong; then, growing reticent about Harrison Steele, talked only of himself.

"I came up on a *piragua*," he explained. "Like this one, but not so good; a dirty old tub owned by a half-breed named Rubén Borreguero, who lives up this way. It was the only thing sailing this way at the time from Bolívar, the steamship terminus. And the fellow Rubén claimed to know—er—Harrison. Maybe he did. Anyway, I must admit that he treated me all right until he ditched me. And—" grudgingly "—I suppose he could have done far worse, even then. But—"

His jaw tightened, his fists closed, his narrowed gaze again went up the river.

Torre waited. Presently the other went on:

"I got sick. Thought I had some quinine, but couldn't find it when I looked. Rubén said sleeping ashore might help —we'd all been sleeping on his stinking boat. So they made camp for me—and deserted me there. They must have sneaked at the first daylight. Anway, they were gone when I got up, after sunrise. Damn 'em!"

His knuckles whitened. The Southerner nodded casually, as if hearing an old story.

"Leaving you with a full gun and some food?" he queried.

"Well, yes. There was something in the stew-pot, left over from the night before. But not much."

"And taking anything of yours?"

"My trunk and everything in it. Just a little steamer trunk, but—"

"Money in it?"

"Yes."

"Much?"

"About two hundred."

"Dollars or *bolivares?*"

"Dollars, in *bolivares*. Making a thousand *bolivares*."

"Much too much!" disapproved Torre. "On this river even a hundred *bolivares* may mean—"

He flicked a finger across his throat.

"I know," admitted Steele. "But I might need it all for expenses. And cash money always talks."

"Too loudly, sometimes. People get imaginative. A thousand silver *bolivares* are heavy. Your Rubén may have imagined it was gold. You are really rather lucky that you live."

"Maybe. But there are no thanks coming to him!"

"No. Well, after that, what?"

"I don't remember exactly. I tried to shoot things to eat, and did kill a small

animal or two, although my hands were unsteady. And I tried to signal passing boats—I think there were two, at different times—by waving my undershirt. But they either didn't see me or didn't want to; they stayed away out and kept going."

"Do you know why?"

"Just cussedness, I suppose."

"Not altogether. There's some disorder in the country at present. And a white flag—any white rag, flying on a pole or waving anywhere along shore—usually means either sympathy with rebellion or presence of rebels. So people who don't want to be involved steer clear."

"Oh, that's it!" Light came into the gaunt face as the outlander reviewed his strenuous signaling, the complete ignoring by sailing craft, the tardy turning of Torre himself. Then he laughed shortly.

"That's a new one! Rodney Steele, tropical revolutionist! He bites their heads off and eats 'em alive! And that's what you thought too, eh? But still, you're not exactly neutral, are you? Do you let rebels wave their flag in your face, captain?"

The captain shrugged, smiling.

"It doesn't hurt my face just at present," he said easily. "If it's only one man, why bother to halt when I'm going somewhere? If it's a gang in hiding, using one man as decoy to lure us close and then sweep our deck with a volley, I'm rather stupid to gratify them, don't you think? There are gangs, you know, who don't care whether they massacre federals or rebels, if they can profit by it; and this is a good boat. Also there's even the possibility that some federal outfit, of whom we know nothing and who don't know us, may bait us with the white flag to see if we'll bite; and if we do we're shot up before identities are established. So, from any angle, it hardly seemed sensible to investigate you—until you fell down. Then I grew inquisitive."

"You saw me tumble?"

"Thanks to excellent binoculars. Otherwise you'd probably be there yet. Well, now let's see: our ammunition was locked up with your cash?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Your gun is useless without it. If by chance I could recover it, you would not consider joining us in a little action?"

Steele regarded him sidelong. The captain, lazily returning his gaze, sat poker-faced, giving no hint whether or not he was in earnest. After a moment the Northerner grinned.

"I wouldn't mind a little excitement, if it wouldn't interfere with my job," he admitted. "But just what sort of action have you in mind?"

"Punitive."

"Hm! Against whom?"

"Whom would you suppose?"

Steele's brows drew down.

"I'll stay neutral, thanks," he dryly declined. "A good hot scrap, give and take, might be interesting. But rounding up some poor devils and shooting them for rebellion against what they consider to be wrongs—I see no sport in that. And that, I suppose, is what your punitive expedition amounts to. Not for mine!"

"Very well." Torre's tone was a bit brusque. "One might think you sympathized with rebels, sir."

"One may think what one pleases," retorted the alien. "I'm here on personal business, and I'll attend to it. I'm vastly grateful to you for all your kindness, but—"

"That," broke in Torre, "is nothing. Your company makes a pleasant diversion on an otherwise monotonous voyage. And you are perfectly correct in maintaining neutrality."

"All right. As for sympathies, mine are usually with the under dog, unless I feel that he deserves the tough luck he's getting. And from what I've seen and heard along this river I'd hardly blame the local boys for rebelling against some of the government officials—and hanging

them to boot. But that's their affair, not mine."

"Just so. And," Torre grinned, "I won't execute you for treason. Between ourselves, I should not weep if several government officials I've met were blown to hell in a hurry."

With which he leisurely arose, stretched, and sauntered away around the mast, leaving the Northerner alone. For a time Steele sat gazing absently at the river, which, ceaselessly sliding down under the prow, still seemed endlessly reaching ahead, revealing nothing. Then, reviewing the talk just past, he realized that Torre also had revealed virtually nothing—not even just where he was going, nor just what he meant to do. The bantering invitation to join in "a little action," the suggestion that the stolen trunk might be regained, the friendly interest throughout might mean anything or nothing; and Steele himself was, literally and figuratively, just where he had been when the conversation opened.

For a second his leg muscles tensed, preparatory to following the smoothly reticent captain and asking specific questions. Then, relaxing, he sat still.

There was no hurry. No hurry about anything. He was sailing toward his own objective, and questions would not add an inch to the speed of his progress. And, reacting from mental activity, he felt very weary. Soon his head drooped, and sleepily he found himself remembering only Torre's declaration that he ought to spend this day in bed. Rousing, he started up, stalked back to the hatch, slid below, and strode to his hammock. In another minute he was sound asleep amid the shadows of his curtained cubby.

CHAPTER IV

CAPTURE

THE wind failed.

Through three days it blew only feebly, as if sick. At times, like a strong man angered by an inexplicable weakness, it forced itself into a false display of its usual strength; carried on with dogged persistence—then, exhausted, fell flat. Somewhere far away on the broad Atlantic Ocean, whence usually flowed that trusty northeast stream of air, some turmoil of elements had swerved the aerial currents off course or dammed them back. So here, on yellow fresh water between brown-baked masses of earth, crews of *piraguas* cursed like those of sloops and schooners on the salt sea. And, sweating and straining with canoe and kedge to haul their ships onward, they had more reason for lurid language than the deepwater sailors who only floated and waited.

Yet on the *piragua* of Capitán Torre, and on the lone dugout which repeatedly carried and dropped the kedge, little breath was wasted in blasphemy. The men who had placidly rested when idleness was the order of the day now worked with similar calmness, swearing only when hurt by some small mishap or when too viciously bitten by mosquitoes —which pests, when the course curved near shore, charged from the land in bloodthirsty battalions. Hour after hour the toilers fought the river in the grilling sun, planting the anchor, hauling at the *piassava* hawser, throwing water on their hot heads, sprawling in complete relaxation during the heaven-sent intervals when the wind revived. And hour after hour they forged ahead, whether the Orinoco liked it or not. In those long hours they earned the respect of the observant alien who did not work, sitting at ease on the deck or drowsing down below.

This protracted inactivity by the passenger was not, however, altogether voluntary. On the second day, feeling stronger and somewhat restless, he suggested adding his weight at the rope. The offer was instantly rejected by Torre.

"It'll do me good," Steele asserted,

"to stretch my muscles and sweat some more."

"No!" contradicted the other. "You still need rest to rebuild your strength. And you'd be of no help. These men are used to pulling together; an outsider would only hamper their team-work. Also, as a white man and my guest, you cannot labor among my subordinates. It is not done."

Thus spoke the autocratic Spaniard, the Latin officer, uninfluenced by his schooling in the Northern country where white men could use their hands without degradation. And his sharp tone, his annoyed frown, his darkening eyes all betrayed resentment. Wherefore Steele, with a quizzical lift of the brows, dropped the subject.

Torre was, in truth, not so good-humored since his progress had slowed. As the upstream crawl continued he grew more and more restive, pacing the deck, watching the work with moody impatience, issuing his occasional orders with a snap. At times, turning abruptly away from his men, he stood looking downstream, scanning the glistening water as if half expecting to detect something approaching from astern. Steele, noticing this, once thought he acted as if apprehensive of pursuit, but then, since this seemed preposterous, concluded that he was only hoping to discern some sign of renewed wind. Whenever wind did come Torre visibly brightened; when it again subsided he scowled.

Yet, when each sunset drew near, he suspended the advance early enough to find a night haven and make a secluded camp. At this repeated concealment Steele felt recurrent wonder. By continuing the work until dark, then anchoring and camping on the Orinoco shore, more distance could be gained. By sailing onward after moonrise if the wind arose, still other miles could be added.

The Northerner had learned, however, that no sensible man sailed a large boat by night on the Orinoco, which, with its myriad submerged rocks and shifting sandbars, demanded experienced pilotage even in broad day. And the men, after each long day's labor, were tired out. Still, this stealthy withdrawal into some side stream each night, with its laborious sounding, warping and poling, seemed rather unnatural, particularly in so well armed and apparently fearless a force.

No explanation being offered, the outlander surmised that Torre was playing doubly safe against news of his approach reaching ahead of him. By day no upbound boat could pass him, no downbound craft turn and retreat unseen; whereas by night some unsuspected canoeist might possibly detect his camp, slyly spy on it, and, paddling steadily while the campers slept, carry an alarm. Thus reasoning, the guest refrained from questions.

Another point which puzzled him arose when he chanced to observe the cargo. His hammock, bought down-river at Ciudad Bolívar, was a yellow-brown corded net, wide-meshed as a fish seine, made from palm fiber—*moriche* or *cumare*. This type of hanging bed, he had learned, was made by uncivilized Indians far up the Orinoco and brought to market by a few traders from the same region. Now he observed that the bales in the hold were of cordage closely resembling his hammock; and, poking into one, found that it was identical. Bales of hammocks—hundreds of hammocks—were being conveyed upstream, toward their own makers.

Coals to Newcastle, ice to the Arctic, would be no more preposterous freight than this. Nor could Torre and his men possibly be hammock sellers or buyers. Was this perhaps a shipment made for government use, found bad, now being returned and, with it, soldiery sent to shoot up the culprits and thus teach them better principles? That seemed most unlikely—so much work, so long

a journey, to punish petty trickery. Moreover—

Just then Steele glanced up, to find the leather-faced first *sargento* gazing down at him through the hatchway. Sombrero atilt, eyes sardonically amused, thin lips downturned in a dour smile, the native seemed enjoying the stranger's puzzlement.

"Good hammocks," remarked Steele, at random.

"Good ballast," dryly replied the watcher. And he moved indolently away.

Steele likewise turned from the bales, somewhat chagrined. Ballast? Hammocks worth thousands of *bolivares* used only as a counterweight? Even so, what of it? Therewith he dismissed conjectures.

So they all crept on. Meanwhile, well fed on rather crude but nourishing fare (mostly native beans, rice and cheese), Steele recuperated fast. Face and body grew less angular; skin regained a more healthful color; and, assisted by Torre's razor, he fully revealed his natural countenance—long-featured, set-mouthed, determined, slow to smile, but not unpleasant. Thus cleansing his own face, he noted that all his companions except Torre remained beardless without shaving; at least, he never saw them use a blade. All were *mestizos*, mixed bloods of tawny coloring. Some were very dark; yet none was black, none looked negroid; their swarthiness seemed Indian, not African. And all, whatever their shade, bore themselves like self-reliant white men, with occasional flashes of Spanish humor lightening their habitual composure.

Then at last the wind revived. And the Orinoco, for several days so oddly empty, showed life.

Bowling along with sheets full and helm double-manned, the *piragua* surged headlong past brutish boulders, up through wicked *raudales**, over or around treacherous sunken sandbanks, flirting with disaster, yet ever eluding it as the watchful pilot bawled abrupt orders. This fellow, the second *sargento*, evidently knew the river as Torre knew his men; and the *capitán*, once more at ease, left all cruising command to him. Idling along the deck, the recent toilers at paddle and rope luxuriated in their renewed indolence.

Torre and Steele, loafing side by side before the mast, watched the river sweep down at them, the rocks march almost to their prow, then sullenly slide by abeam, while white waters snarled savagely and whirlpools growled in futile menace. Rushing air, rushing water, reckless speed exhilarated all; and as each particularly ugly danger was outwitted all grinned joyously, while some of the men voiced derisive catcalls or ribald insults at beaten destroyers.

Suddenly, at a sharp call from the pilot, all fell silent. Men sprang up. Torre leaned forward, eyes narrow. Steele, peering ahead, saw another *piragua*.

Half a mile away, low-riding, bare-masted, dull-colored, the boat was not easily visible until the eye fixed squarely on it. Swinging slowly around a curve, it was heading downstream in the teeth of the wind, borne by the current, propelled by sweeps which rose and fell sluggishly on each side; following the erratic channel, taking no chances of being blown off course by attempting the use of sail.

Now for a moment it suddenly halted motion, its sweeps rigid, as if paralyzed by sight of the oncoming ship downriver. So perceptible was this apparent hesitation that among Torre's men passed a rumble of sarcastic mirth.

"*O Dios mío!*" mocked one, in quavering falsetto. "See all those rough men coming up the river! Hide yourselves, girls!"

The rumble deepened. Torre himself grinned. Then, sobering, he called:

"Take your own advice, lads! Get below! *Pronto!*"

*Rapids.

After an instant's reluctance they obeyed. Smoothly, almost silently, they melted down through the hatchway and were gone from the deck—all but the indispensable steersmen, sailors, and pilot. The movement, partly screened by the low, broad foresail and by the men remaining above, could hardly be plain to the upstream watchers. And now Torre added:

"You too, Steele, if you don't mind."

Steele frowned, balked a second, then, catching a frosty glitter in the captain's eyes, grudgingly conceded:

"Oh, all right. But say, that tub looks like Borreguero's. D'you suppose he'd be coming back?"

"Hardly likely. All these up-river *piraguas* look about the same. Will you kindly go below?"

"Uh-huh."

Steele went, pausing beyond the mast to look again at the other boat. He made out nothing new. She was coming on again, maintaining steerage way, though still with apparent hesitance; her sweeps seemed to hang longer in air, to dip with less energy. As he slid down among the concealed soldiery he wondered anew at Torre's caution.

"Is she coming on, *señor?*" asked a man.

"*Sí.* Slowly," he answered.

"*Bueno!*"

The men grinned at one another. All stood quiet, listening.

Minutes dragged. Heat increased; heat of sun beating into the windless hold, heat of men closely crowded. Above, a quiet order or two sounded and died; a block squeaked; canvas fluttered, thrashed, grew quiet. Suddenly from ahead came a yell:

"*Qué infierno!* Sheer off, you! What the—"

Blistering profanity in river Spanish rose in gabbling crescendo, ceased in a solid thump. For a moment Torre's hidden men all staggered, clutching one another, knocked half off balance. Then, as a shrill whistle sounded, they leaped upward as if shot out of the hold by steel springs. And as Steele, thrown back by their rush, emerged after them he found half of them already aboard the downbound *piragua.*

Stopped dead by the cannily maneuvered collision, the other boat had hung immobile while the blue-clad men swarmed over her. Now she was drifting off, but under control. Fore and aft, captors were dropping anchor and seizing tiller, while others, guns up, covered both crew and hatchway.

On the Torre vessel similar swift teamwork was halting it. Anchor splashed, sail fell, hull swung giddily between wind and current, stopping short in its upward course. And Torre, balancing on widespread legs, stood coolly smiling, watching all with the ease of long experience. This was by no means the first time he and his gang had seized a ship.

"Federal soldiers?" thought Steele. "River pirates!"

CHAPTER V

FIFTY LASHES

LATER on, Steele admired the skill of the entire seizure. The men, dropping below for concealment, had left their rifles lying flat on the deck, ready for instant use, yet inconspicuous. The lowering of one sail to lessen momentum had been accomplished as if required by caution in passing the other ship in a channel apparently river-wide, but known by rivermen to be uncomfortably narrow at that place.

The hulls of both vessels like those of all other Orinoco *piraguas*—were of *paratura* wood, so tough as to withstand all but the hardest knocks; and the angle of collision had been so cunningly calculated, the moment so shrewdly chosen, that now both boats floated unharmed by the glancing but stopping blow. All of

which, like the knockout punch of an expert boxer, called for masterly timing and trained coordination of brain and brawn.

Now Torre, smiling his little smile, surveyed his paralyzed victim with cool triumph, yet with keen vigilance, as if it might yet lash out at him. And his first *sargento*, with rifle aimed into the hatchway, barked:

"Out, you! Come out—with the hands empty! Surrender to El Halcón!"

Nothing came out. Nothing stirred or answered. Still, on both vessels, the men in blue narrowly watched that opening until a man on the captured boat spoke up:

"*No hay, capitán.* There is nobody below there."

"I am not *capitán*," gruffly disclaimed the *sargento*. "But if you lie to me you shall suffer! No men are down under?"

"*Ningún!* Not one! Rip my belly if I speak not truth!"

"*Bien.* I will!" ferociously promised the non-com. "Ciro and Blas, drop down there and see!"

Two men obeyed. The others still watched. Soon sounded a muffled call within the hold:

"Nobody here. Nor any cargo either."

"*Cómo?* No cargo?"

"*Nada.* Only some fresh cowhides. And few of those."

"*Diablo!*" growled the non-com. And, turning to Torre, "You heard, *capitán?*"

"*Sí,*" shortly acknowledged Torre. "Who commands there?"

"Pedro Gual, *señor,*" replied the spokesman of the other boat, stepping toward Torre. "From Atures, traveling in peace to—"

He stopped short, staring at Steele, who, standing behind the line of Torre's riflemen, nevertheless could see between their heads. Hitherto Pedro Gual had been blocked from view by the *sargento* and others on the captured craft. Now, as his short shape and swarthy face were clearly revealed, Steel gave an inarticulate growl; and Gual, loose lips sagging and dark eyes bulging, involuntarily recoiled a step. For a second both stood forgetful of all else, while Torre's keen gaze flitted from one to the other. Then Steele shouldered his way forward.

"*Buenos días!*" he sarcastically greeted. "We meet again, Pedro Gual Rubén Borreguero! How is your health?"

Borreguero, alias Gual, looked quite ill. A yellow pallor blanched his dismayed visage, and his thick throat visibly gulped. Then, swiftly recovering, he turned again to Torre.

"There is some mistake, *capitán,*" he asserted. "I do not know this man. Rubén Borreguero has gone up the river, and I am Pedro Gual, as I can prove by these men of mine. Is this stranger perhaps a little *loco?*"

The brazen denial and innuendo brought a flush to Steele's face and a contemptuous smile to Torre's. Banking on the Northerner's recent sickness and his obvious rescue by men unacquainted with him, Borreguera might possibly have won his bold play but for two things: his own facial betrayal of guilt, and Torre's accurate estimate of the outlander. Now Torre crisply instructed his *sargento*:

"Send that man here! Search the boat thoroughly!"

"*Mucho gusto.*" The leathery officer casually rammed his gun muzzle into Borreguero's ribs, made him drop into his own canoe astern, assigned two paddlers. As Borreguero glumly rode across the current Steele grimly laughed:

"What a break!"

Fists shut, jaw hard, he contemplated the approaching betrayer who had left him to die, then come back to meet vengeance. Torre nodded indifferently, as if he had seen many other queer breaks of retributive fate.

"You will wait until I am through with him," he said.

"Wait, nothing!" Steele wheeled, face

darkening. "My bill antedates yours, old fellow! And—"

"And the collection is in my hands," interrupted the captain. "I have several bills on file, long overdue. And when I start collecting I collect. Leave him to me. You can have him when I'm through—if you want him."

His tone was hard, his blue-black eyes harder. And, after a long look at him, Steele said no more. Unmoving, he watched Borreguero come aboard, walk past him—sidling away as if expecting assault—and plod on up into the bow. There, flanked by two guards and confronted by Torre, the sweating prisoner answered questions which no others heard. Steele, pointedly excluded by Torre's command, remained with Torre's men, who, standing loose, watching the other boat with apparent indifference, still had imperceptibly altered their positions so that now they blocked the Northerner from advance to their occupied commander.

So smooth was the movement, so casual the present attitude of the gunmen, that when Steele realized his position he grinned, then grew thoughtful. Pirates? Hardly! Or, if so, certainly not the swashbuckling, murderous, mutinous gutter-rats who once had infested the old Spanish Main and been vastly overrated by romanticists ever since the last of them swung in gallows chains. Federal soldiers, as he had first thought? Perhaps so. And, if so, a picked corps. At any rate, an experienced body devoted to Torre, whom the aroused *sargento* had unthinkingly called El Halcón—The Hawk.

There his thought halted. Up on the deck of the other *piragua* clumped a yellowish box, heaved from the hold, which he instantly recognized: his own trunk. The uniformed men over there clustered around it, fingered it, dispersed; and he knew it still was locked. Incredible, yet true: Borreguero had not smashed it open. As he gloated across the water at it, sudden excitement developed on the Torre boat. Up forward sounded a scuffle, a hoarse yell, a plunging splash overboard.

Two other splashes rapidly ensued. Men on both boats crowded to the sides. Between them, swimming frantically across the current, Borreguero strove to escape—although, so far from shore, escape obviously was impossible. Hard at his kicking heels swam the two guards; and now other Torre men sprang off the other *piragua* to meet him. Gasping, thrashing, the fugitive was surrounded, grabbed, deliberately forced under water in a splashing flurry.

Swept downstream, the struggling knot of men was intercepted by comrades who had jumped into the canoes and paddled athwart the flow. And soon Borreguero was hoisted, more than half drowned, back to the deck whence he had leaped. His captors, also again above water, laughed excitedly and made derisive gestures at a couple of long crocodiles which now suddenly rose from nowhere, too late.

"Strip him!" ordered Torre.

Forthwith the puking prisoner was shucked out of his shirt and trousers. While the naked shape still struggled for breath El Halcón emptied the pockets finding only a few cheap trifles; narrowly inspected the pockets themselves; suddenly turned the trousers inside out, reversed one pocket, and voiced one word:

"Cuchillo."

Half a dozen keen belt knives were drawn and proffered. Taking the nearest, he cut from the back of the pocket a flat patch of thin rubber, which, affixed by clumsy stitches and some native glue, was proof against water or sweat. And from this cunningly concealed envelope he drew a square of paper; unfolded it, read closely written words. His set face relaxed in an ironic smile.

"So Señor Pedro Gual of Atures," he derided, "you travel in peace, strictly

neutral, carrying no message of any sort —did you not say so? And this little slip of paper, saying you are Rubén Borreguero of Guayabal, who are to bring back supplies and ammunition and more men—this is all a lie which some foul enemy stuck on you, *no es verdad?* Or are these Borreguero's *pantalones* you wear? If so, where is he?"

Borreguero, still retching, gave him a sick look and said nothing. Torre read the note again, then turned to his men.

"They have not," he announced, "much ammunition. Most of it had to be sent into Amazonas, where there is border fighting."

To Steele's surprise, the men looked glum. Presumably the losers of that ammunition were their enemies; therefore such a loss should naturally be welcomed. Instead, these fellows acted almost as if a blow had fallen on themselves. Soberfaced, they eyed one another, then again regarded El Halcón. He turned back to Borreguero, studied him a second, then shook his head as if discarding the thought of questioning him further. Liar and sneak, the prisoner would say whatever he thought would sound best, and to his information could be given no credence.

"*Sargento!*" called Torre. "What have you found?"

"*Nada,*" the non-com called back. "Nothing but this trunk, hidden under the hides."

"Unopened?"

"*Sí.* It is a trunk most tough, hard as a safe, and almost as heavy! The lock and hinges are badly scratched as if worked on with knives, but still unbroken."

"*Bien.* Let it lie there."

Torre and Steele grinned at each other. The explanation was clear: Borreguero, despatched down-river again on arrival at Guayabal, had brought the trunk with him to work on in secret; and, busy watching the river, had as yet found little time for the work. In his mind the sick owner, deserted on a desolate shore, had died, and the treasure in the trunk was his own; eagerly anticipated, but not necessarily acquired for a while. Moreover, the trunk itself was worth keeping. So there need be no destructive haste.

Now Torre cast one more glance at the sick wretch, his nose wrinkling as if he regarded a loathsome rat. And to his *sargento* he snapped:

"Make sail! Follow me!"

Wheeling, he gestured to his own sailing master. Prompt activity ensued. Sails rose, anchors rose, ships surged up against the current in tandem formation. Borreguero also rose, empty now of water, eyeing El Halcón with pallid dread. Suddenly he turned to Steele, babbling:

"*Señor!* Remember I left you food—I left you your gun—I would not have gone, but I feared we would catch your sickness! And I was coming back, just now, to see how you fared—I have not opened your trunk—I am not a bad fellow—"

"Shut up!" jarred Steele.

Borreguero gulped and caught his tongue. Torre smiled. Torre's men laughed harshly. The *piraguas* sailed on, conned by the second *sargento,* angling toward the western shore. After awhile they anchored again, snug against the steep clay bank of Colombia. And there Torre again coldly confronted Borreguero.

"You invited us down yonder," he reminded, "to rip up your belly if you lied. You have lied. So—"

He paused. The captive grew ghastly.

"No, no!" he screeched. "*Señor—capitán—por amor de Dios*—have mercy!"

"Mercy? Hm!" Torre appeared to consider. "Mercy! Well, such mercy as you deserve. As you have said, you left this North American *señor,* who trusted you, alive. So I shall leave you alive—for him to deal with at his pleasure. But first, to teach you the vanity of treachery and

thievery, I will give you a touch of *la bastinada.*"

With a forefinger he signaled. Men seized the captive. Moaning, struggling, he was rushed up the bank and bound to a tree. With their knives the *mestizos* cut and trimmed long, lithe bush whips, selected for resiliency and toughness.

"*Cincuenta.* Fifty," sentenced Torre. "Ten each. And lay it on!"

Five men, grinning, followed one another with ten whistling blows each. And they laid it on that squirming shape with terrific sliding strokes which flayed away the skin. Unlike the stereotyped Turkish *bastinado*, confined to the feet, this slashed the victim from neck to knees. At every slash Borreguero squealed like a stuck pig.

Throughout the flagellation Torre watched judicially. At the end he announced:

"Now it's your turn, Steele. Do you want him?"

"Hell, no!" The Northerner already had turned away. "Let him go!"

"You are quite magnanimous. Borreguero, *oiga!* The *señor* spares you further penalties and asks that you be allowed to go. What have you to say?"

"Ah, *mil gracias! Válgate Dios!*" blubbered the culprit. "A thousand thanks —God bless you—"

"Oh, shut up!" repeated Steele. And, disgusted by the craven whine, he walked toward the boats.

"You have good reason to thank the *señor*—and me also," continued Torre. "By some men not so merciful you would be left tied here *como Indio.** As it is, remember that hereafter you are to keep faith with any foreign *señor* who hires you!"

Turning away, he walked after Steele. A man cut Borreguero's bonds. Another, obeying Torre's orders, brought from the *piragua* his wet clothes, which, with many a wince, he pulled on as protection against mosquitoes. A third brought some food and a box of matches, dropping them on the ground as if for a dog. At that Borreguero stared, paled, yammered:

"No, no, no,—do not leave me—I am sick—I shall starve—"

"*Y diablo te lleve!*" growled the Torre man, slapping him across the mouth. "The devil take you!"

From the boat Torre himself answered:

"You are not so sick as was this *señor.* If you starve, so did he. From what I have seen of you I know you left him a stew-pot and his gun not because of your tender heart, but because you feared he might shoot if you came too near. You are a sneaking rat, and when that food is gone you can eat what rats eat. All aboard, men! Up anchors!"

The short ships sailed, leaving Borreguero alone on the uninhabited Colombian shore, weaponless, almost foodless, almost hopeless, cut off from his Venezuelan homeland by swirling water too wide to swim and infested by crocodiles, electric eels, ferocious cannibal-fish—yet free, fairly able-bodied, equipped with the makings of fire. And as the two vessels, captor and captured, plowed on up the river Torre frowned moodily at nothing, muttering:

"Wrong, wrong! Why, Ricardo de la Torre, will you do those things? To leave a living traitor behind you is always wrong. You should have shot him!"

Then, with an up-jerk of the head, he once more sent his gaze far up the Orinoco, looking forward, tossing Borreguero completely off his mind. What was done was done.

Hardly five minutes after those *piraguas* sailed, the apparently lifeless tangle of riverside trees near Borreguero showed life. Out from them strode a be-

**Como Indio*—like an Indian. Up the Orinoco it has not been uncommon for *mestizos*, after flogging an Indian captive nearly to death, to leave him tied to a tree to die as he might—torn by wild beasts, bitten by snakes, eaten alive by insects, or merely starved.—A. O. F.

whiskered, hollow-bodied tatterdemalion gripping a bare knife, who, eyeing Borreguero wolfishly, snatched up the food and ravenously ate; a Colombian desperado, a vagabond from devil-knew-where, who had skulked amid the greenery, seen all, waited until he could devour the providential provender. The unarmed Venezuelan retreated, watched

scowlingly, yet estimated the robber shrewdly. And when, with a sigh of relief, the desperate Colombian ceased eating, the Venezuelan made amicable advances. Within half an hour the wolf and the rat were tramping down the shore, allies in extremity, hunting something more to eat—and, most eagerly, a boat.

And, not so very far down the Orinoco, a boat was coming.

CHAPTER VI

SHOWDOWN

STEELE straightened up from his trunk, grinning happily. One hand held a sectional cleaning rod, the other a carton of cartridges. Dropping the lid, he sat on it; then, jointing the rod, tearing a rag, withdrawing the bolt of his rifle, went to work at cleaning the bore. And presently, when his work was completed with a few drops of oil from a flat can, he broke the box and loaded. Rising, he offered the weapon to Torre, who had strolled near.

"Try it?" invited the Northerner.

The *capitán* took it; aimed expertly at a vulture on a dead tree towering from

the nearer shore; drew his forefinger tight—outside the trigger guard. Then, smiling, he lowered the piece, unfired.

"Not now," he declined. "Cartridges should not be wasted. And the gun would need recleaning."

"That's easy."

"Also," added the Southerner, "the report might carry far. Too far."

"Oh! Are we getting close?"

"Close enough to warrant discretion."

Steele glanced ahead, then let his gaze rove back along the shores. So far as he could see, the river was as lifeless as ever. To the left, the hulking hills of Venezuelan Guayana stood stark, yellow-brown, studded with sooty black rocks of every size and shape; harsh, hard, dismal. To the right, the interminable Colombian flats lay featureless behind their low screen of dull green.

The other *piragua*, captured from Borreguero, had vanished from the river. At a spot downstream selected by Torre's experienced pilot, that encumbrance had been worked into a narrow cleft between Venezuelan cliffs and left firmly moored, utterly invisible to any eyes but those of birds. The Borreguero crew—submissive peons unaccustomed to independent thought—rode now on their captor's boat, perfunctorily watched by one rifleman, soberly awaiting whatever disposal their new lord might make of them. And now, following Steele's gaze, Torre's eyes dwelt briefly on the apathetic prisoners who were only so much excess weight—and who therefore must be jettisoned before he cleared for action. Glancing up, he found the tall Northerner regarding him critically.

"I think," said Steele, "we've reached the place where we'd better have another talk."

"I was thinking," said Torre, "the same thing. Let's go forward."

Snapping the trunk-lock shut with one foot, pocketing his cartridge box, loosely gripping his rifle, the Northerner swung after the captain. Before the mast they sat, not now sheltered by the square-sail from the broiling afternoon sun, yet at ease in their accustomed spot. Here they had passed many hours in wordless companionship, thinking, dreaming, surmising, but withholding their inner selves from each other. Now Steele demanded:

"Just what are you and your outfit?"

As bluntly, El Halcón answered:

"Outlaws!"

Steele stared. He had expected a bit of quizzical evasion, perhaps of satiric equivocation, before the real reply came. The quick counter took him aback.

"Isn't that," he presently asked, "putting it strong?"

Torre slightly shrugged.

"Outlaws," he repeated. "Robbers. Killers. Wild beasts, to be shot at sight. Bounties on our heads. That sort of thing."

Steele's brows drew down.

"That," he asserted, "is altogether too strong!"

Torre laughed shortly.

"So we think, too. Especially the wild beast part. Others think otherwise. We are outlawed; outside the law, deprived of its protection. Protection? Ha!" He laughed harshly. "We rob, to keep on living. We kill, for the same purpose—and for vengeance. That's our real reason for keeping on living: vengeance! Those on whom we avenge ourselves are within the law—the present law of the present powers of Venezuela. So, to them and their hired army, we are dangerous animals whose deaths are worth money. And so my statement is quite correct."

"Oh, I see. You're revolutionists!"

"No."

Steele frowned in perplexity. Coolly Torre explained:

"Revolutionists want to overthrow the entire government. We don't. I consider Juan Vicente Gomez, dictator of Venezuela, to be a real man. I consider his government to be the best this country has had for many years, or will have for

many years to come. It's far from perfect, but it's far better than Venezuela would get from any of the revolutionsts who are trying to overthrow him. I know them all. And what I know about all of them would, if I told it—stink out loud!"

He grinned as he used the Northern idiom. Then his face again set.

"Well, then," slowly said Steele, "I still don't get you. Why are you an outlaw and so on?"

"Juan Vicente*," replied the other, "stays at Caracas, the capital, or at Maracay, his home. He cannot travel all about the country. So his knowledge of what goes on in the country at large is confined to the reports of his governors. Most of them are liars; almost all are merciless grafters, enriching themselves by squeezing the last *real* out of every poor devil who can possibly pay a tax; more than one is at heart an assassin, constantly scheming to murder Juan Vicente himself and become absolute dictator. He knows it. But, as far as he knows, they're the best tools he has, so he uses them; and until he's convinced they're rotten he accepts their word and their advice. So do your own Presidents, unless my observation up North was all wrong. And unless I'm mistaken some of your presidential advisers have been about as self-seeking as ours down here!"

He paused. Steele said nothing. After a moment Torre went on, in the same judicial tone:

"You men up North are colder and slower than we are. And every two or four years you have a vote that means something. So you wait and say it with ballots. We're different. Our paper vote doesn't mean much, and we don't like to wait; so we try to say it with bullets —the bigger the better. But that, of course, isn't acceptable to the politicians who manage to stay inside the law. So if they can catch us—"

He drew a finger across his throat.

"Now I," he continued, "am in everlasting, vindictive, murderous revolt against a certain governor of a certain state of Venezuela—and the federal army that supports him. Why? My father had a big *hacienda* in that State. My sister and I went to college in your States. She was a little older than I, and came back first. The governor wanted both our *hacienda* and my sister. He got them both—after considerable trouble. My father died defending his property. My mother died of wounds. My sister, after one night as the captive of that governor, took poison. It all was made to look legal or accidental, under pretense that my father was fomenting rebellion. And that greasy, filthy eel of a governor still lives and rules, protected by the federal army. And I, the last of the 'traitorous' Torres, am a hunted wild beast."

His voice remained completely impersonal, his face expressionless; but his hands, clasped over one knee, were mottled with the congestion of strain. Steele's scowl deepened, and his eyes smouldered. Every word of the concise narrative had rung true.

"And Gomez refuses you justice?" he probed.

"He does not know the truth. I am convinced of that. And I cut my own throat with him before I even arrived here. When I heard of the thing and started South I raved, like the young hothead I was. I alone, single-handed, would kill the governor, the whole army, the President himself, and blast all Venezuela to hell, to avenge my people. In fact, I'm not sure that I even left any part of this whole South American continent undevastated." He smiled bleakly. "And there's an excellent Venezuelan Secret Service. My threats traveled faster than I did, and corroborated the governor's lies. Only a lucky warning from an old friend in Port-of-Spain, where I had to change steamers—and where several thousand Venezuelan rebels

*This informal name of General Gomez is often used by Venezuelans.

live under British protection—saved me from landing in the government dungeons over here. And within two weeks after I sneaked into my own country I was shot three times and stabbed once."

"By soldiers?"

"Technically, yes. Actually, the governor's assassins, working in army uniform. They died before they could quite finish their work. But so far as law was concerned, that absolutely ended me, you know."

Steele nodded. Blow or bullet against any thug wearing municipal or military uniform incurred implacable vengeance by the authorities maintained in power by that uniform.

"Since then," continued Torre, "I have operated outside the law. My operations will never stop until either that governor or the last of the Torres is a dead dog. My men all are of the same mind. I do not pay them. I would not insult them by offering them pay. Every one of them has a score against that same official; they will go through hell or high water, swim or sink, to square their account. I have lost many men, but new ones always come in. And"—again the grim smile—"the other side has also lost many men, and much property. We take whatever we need, wherever we find it. On the other hand, we keep it no longer than we need it. After that, any poor devil can have it.

"This *piragua* you ride on is stolen—or seized, or commandeered, if that sounds better. Legally it belongs to the governor of Amazonas Territory, upstream; so do all the hammocks in the hold. Actually it belongs to the heirs of one Jonás Losada, a trader up yonder, who somehow died rather mysteriously after the governor had estimated the value of his cargo. Let those heirs try to get it! Watch any humble trader's heirs get anything from a governor!

"It came along and we took it—to go where I am going. The guns my men carry—the clothes they stand in—the food we eat—all were taken from somebody. Somebody on the federal side. The guns and clothes were those of poor *soldados* forced to fight us awhile ago, against their will. They are still living and glad to have met us. The officers who drove them are not."

Steele chuckled grimly. Torre's lips quirked under his mustache, then straightened.

"But I am talking too much," concluded the Venezuelan. "And you, Steele, are riding with outlaws—thieves—murderers—"

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Steele. "You're talking too *damned* much! Give me time!"

"Ha!" laughed Torre, short, hard, yet suddenly relaxed. And for several minutes the *piragua* sailed sleepily on while the two said nothing. At length the Northerner slowly declared:

"If I didn't have business on hand I'd like to take a fall out of that governor myself. Is he up ahead here?"

"No. For the moment that's all behind me. This trip is—mostly a matter of business." Torre hesitated oddly, then went on: "And this land at the left is the State of Bolívar, for whose present governor I have much respect: General Perez. He'd kill me at sight, but he's a real soldier and a real man. Fortunately he's several hundred miles down-river, at Ciudad Bolívar, where your steamer docked. I'd hate to have to shoot at him."

Steele eyed him quizzically.

"You're a queer cuss," he said.

"I know it. And it's taken me quite a long time to reach the point where I differentiate between men and their official positions. Now I consider a man as a man, and—if he's a real man—put myself in his place, and consider again. So now I respect Perez—and understand Gomez. I'd kill either of them if I had to, but I'd dodge it if I could. But let's get on. We're nearly where we're going, and—"

Wheeling in his seat, he squarely faced the other.

"Now it's your turn to talk," he went on. "You've been holding back. And I've been thinking. Just who—and what—is your cousin Harrison Steele, here in Venezuela? Just where is he? And what's your business with him?"

"Well," drawled Steele, "that's what I was going to tell you. And it's twice as easy now that I know your—er—political position. I'm afraid that Harrison isn't altogether a nice boy. I mean, from the standpoint of church-goers and, maybe, constituted authorities.

"Not a really bad sort; just reckless and, at times, pretty wild. At least he used to be, and he probably hasn't steadied down much. Fact is, I rather suspect that he's a wild-riding, hard-shooting outlaw of some kind down here. That's only surmise. But it would be just like him. There's a wild streak in all us Steeles, anyway. I feel it myself sometimes.

"We haven't heard from him for a long time. He came down here—that is, to South America—several years ago, after— Well, after his father kicked him out. Since then he must have knocked all around. Now his dad and mine both are dead, and there's a legal matter—inheritance, you know—to be discussed between us. So—here I am."

His gaze reached ahead, came back, glanced at Torre, found the dark eyes unreadable. So he went on:

"You'll understand that locating Harry through stiff-necked legal and official channels would be slow work. So, bearing in mind his natural bent, I've used other sources of information. The best dope I could get was that the best place to get in touch with him is up ahead here, at a settlement called Guayabal, on the Venezuelan side of this Rio Orinoco. Also that his name down here isn't Harrison Steele but—"

He hesitated; then, with a self-derisive chuckle, went on:

"When I gave you that name I was still sort of sick, and not sure of you. The name now is Enrique Hierro. Meaning Iron, instead of Steele. Why he made that change I don't—"

Again he halted, shocked silent by a sudden glare in the blue-black eyes. For one second it burned, while the black-browed face and short body remained motionless. Then, like a terrific discharge of tropical lightning, it was gone, leaving Steele stunned, Torre blank-faced as a dark sky with explosive wrath expended.

A long moment passed, while the sleepy waters purled under the prow, the high white clouds floated along the brilliant blue, the yellow-black-green shore imperceptibly crept along backward. Then Torre arose.

"That," he said, "was just what I feared. I too, friend Steele, am traveling to Guayabal to see one Enrique Hierro. I too have business with him; a matter requiring settlement—outside the law!"

His black-lashed lids narrowed to slits, through which the inner lightning again glimmered.

"Concerning that matter I'll say no more just now," he continued. "The man himself, Hierro, is hardly as picturesque as you've fancied him. If he'd lived up to his name and called himself Acero —meaning steel—or even proved himself good stout *hierro*, he'd merit some respect. Instead he's locally called Herrumbre—meaning rust! Gnawing, corroding, rotting rust, destroying good metal, defiling anything it touches! And this Herrumbre now is about to be rubbed out, polished off, permanently removed!"

His teeth shut with a click. Steele scowled down at his rifle, unconsciously rubbing a finger along its newly oiled barrel.

"Exactly," nodded Torre. "Just like that!"

The Northerner's jaw tightened, and his gaze grew antagonistic.

"I doubt," he declared, "that you and I are talking about the same man. Even if we are—he's Harrison Steele to me, and I intend to do what I came for! And if he were what you say, it seems to me he'd be rather small prey for a flock of falcons to pick on."

"You may be right," conceded El Halcón, a bit stiffly. "This Hierro may be another man. And ordinarily I do not touch carrion; I let the vultures do that. But—We shall see! Meanwhile—"

His glance rested on the loaded rifle as if he contemplated sequestering it. Then he turned and strode aft, to look again down the Orinoco. Steele sat where he was, brow knotted with thought. And sluggishly the little ship sailed on.

CHAPTER VII

COLD NERVE

SUNSET. Sunset and stars, in rapid succession. Hardly had the brief afterglow died into pale blue when, in the much darker blue at eastward, the stars gleamed forth in swiftly multiplying profusion; and as the western sky in turn quickly deepened, the little bright dots became myriads of high-hung lamps radiating a pure white glow all their own. Down on earth and river the dusk thickened, yet remained transparent; for the far upper reaches of air still held a ghostly sheen of sunlight, imperceptible to mortal vision but, with the star-glow, holding back full night. And in this last tenuous twilight the *piragua* of El Halcón swooped up the Orinoco toward the cluster of clay houses which formed Guayabal.

Held back earlier, marking time until speed was required, the vessel now blew on under full sail, making the grandstand finish loved by Spanish minds—and, to any watchers at Guayabal, giving the impression of continuous effort to reach so important a port. And for any eyes which might be watching through telescopes there was an additional show: a short man at the prow in the full field uniform of a federal army officer; and, beside him, a taller man topped by the white helmet of a foreign stranger, English or American. Behind these—if the telescope could discern them—were visible blue-clad men garbed as Orinocan *soldados;* soldiers sufficiently seasoned and regular to be clothed all alike. Stage set, characters posed, scenery skilfully half-lighted, the master showman now was opening his first act in his present performance—with the dénouement problematical.

Meanwhile, a mile or two down-river, the Borreguero peons cheerfully made a supper on the Colombian shore—cut off from their own land, but quite content. They had not been flogged, or abused, or even worked. They had been given food, hammocks, matches, and even a couple of *machetes;* also the advice to build a hut and loaf a few days out of sight.

Accustomed only to poverty and brutality, they were more than willing to prolong their vacation to its utmost before again resuming servitude. So now the force of El Halcón was rid of all possible loose tongues—except possibly one. And to that one Torre had attended.

"Steele," he had said, "I understand your viewpoint. I also know, from what I've seen of you, that you're a straight shooter. Perhaps a little too straight—or too set in your ideas—to belong in my outfit. I really did hope to have you join in with us—thought you might be really just a sort of adventurer, out for excitement; and, whether you admit it or not, you're a natural fighting man. Also, if that rifle of yours is as accurate as it looks, and you can handle it as I think you can, you'd be valuable to me as a long-range sharpshooter. And you'd be by no means the first North American

to fight in an irregular South American force, just for the hell of it.

"But we evidently can't get together now. So we can do one of two things: part company, or just keep off each other's toes. I can put you ashore on the Venezuelan side and let you walk the rest of the way; it's rough going, but you can make it in a day or two at a sensible gait. Or I *can* carry you on, with the understanding that you'll attend strictly to your own business at Guayabal and know absolutely nothing about mine. Furthermore I'll give you time to talk to your man—if you don't take too long. My time's limited. And I'm handicapping myself considerably by giving you any time at all. Those three days of poor wind down-river—Well, never mind. Which is it—walk or ride?"

The crisp ultimatum brought to Steele's moody face an appreciative smile.

"Naturally, the answer is—ride," he responded. "It would do me no good to find my man dead."

"No?" shot Torre.

Steele stared, blinked, frowned as the inference sank in. Torre's eyes twinkled.

"A matter of inheritance, you said," the Southerner reminded. "Would you lose much if he died?"

"Well, no. Quite otherwise. But—"

"Ha!" laughed Torre. "And you called me a queer cuss! You come all this distance, and almost die, to present a ne'er-do-well cousin with property he'd never know about if you just sat tight! But you call me queer because I dislike to kill men I respect! Who's queer now?"

At the slightly foolish look on the other's face he laughed louder.

"And if you were not just the kind of cuss you are, Steele, you wouldn't be here now. You'd be back with Borreguero's peons—or with Borreguero himself. All right. We ride!"

Wheeling away, he left Steele momentarily speechless. Almost immediately the ship took on full sail and full speed. And when Torre reappeared he wore the complete military equipment of a Gomez officer—and a dandified one at that.

"How am I?" he asked. "All right?"

"And then some," grinned Steele, eyeing his unnecessary glasses and spurs, then admiring the general set-up. "Man, you look like Gomez's favorite nephew."

"Why not? Gomez officers contributed it all. The worst trouble was to find the right boots—my feet are rather small. And the breeches had to be taken in several inches around the waist."

With which he again strolled away, cockily swaggering, perfectly in character with his present make-up.

And now, with these two odd allies standing before the mast, the vessel sprinted to the finish of her long run. And both men critically surveyed the hamlet of Guayabal. Set on a small flat open space atop an almost precipitous clay bank carved into terraces by bygone floods, it was a mere huddle of squatty clay dwellings, all small, without even the customary dingy church towers rising another few feet above the low roofs. To right and left were scattered trees, also low. Behind it rose a bold hill, perhaps a couple of hundred feet high, studded with the usual black rocks.

"What good is it?" audibly wondered Steele.

"Not much, to men like us," answered Torre. "But it controls an overland road—such as it is—into the back country. Above here the river is very bad at certain seasons—including now. So the traders often use the road. That means haulage and other pickings for these people. And in case of troop movements the road's very valuable."

"Oh, I see. Any troops here now?"

A slight smile, a quizzical glance, left the question open and reminded Steele of his agreement to attend strictly to his own business. But when the *piragua* struck sail and, slowing, glided to an-

chorage Guayabal answered for herself.

"Quién vive?"

The military challenge barked from a drab figure at the bank-top, shadowy in the now deep dusk, yet visibly armed with a rifle which glinted faintly in the starlight. Other shadows, not so noticeable, loitered farther back.

"Capitán José Carvajal and men, from Apure," lazily answered Torre. "How is El Capitán Paez?"

The sentry hesitated, peering uncertainly; then demanded:

"Speak the password!"

Torre snorted.

"Password! You *burro*, do you think we know your daily words in Apure? Call your *sargento!*"

"That," said a new voice, gruffly authoritative, "is unnecessary. I am Capitán Paez. Come ashore!"

A bulky shape had moved up to supersede the awkward sentinel. To it Torre dryly replied:

"I intend to. And with me this North American *señor*, who has business here. *Sargento*—" he turned to his own first sergeant, "—for the present you will keep all the men on board—and all other people off. Including the town girls."

The *sargento* grinned and saluted with the casual ease of an old campaigner on good terms with his officer. From some men on shore sounded a low laugh. The little byplay, perceived and appreciated above, stamped the newcome Captain Carvajal as a good fellow, yet efficient. And as he and Steele descended into the canoe some one came down the bank with a lighted oil lantern.

With a few strokes the paddlers set their passengers ashore, then returned to their comrades. The lantern-holder proved to be a *soldado* of the more usual Orinoco type, poorly dressed, quite slovenly—a soldier only by grace of the old rifle he bore.

Clambering up the sun-hardened terraces, the trio met Captain Paez at the edge. The lantern light revealed him as heavy-faced, heavy-mustached, heavy-jowled; thick-necked and thick-bodied; greasy-skinned, and carelessly buttoned. A garrison captain, evidently, not overenergetic nor enthusiastic about his present post; but, for all that, shrewd-eyed and habitually suspicious.

Torre punctiliously saluted, as a junior to a senior in service if not in rank. A pleased light showed in Paez's face as he responded, not so snappily.

"I am pleased to find you looking so well, *capitán,*" purred Torre. "The man Borreguero said you were a little ill when he left here."

"Oh! Borreguero? Hm!" grunted Paez. "You met him?"

"*Sí.* And made him prove himself loyal. These days—you know. We are watching the river closely down below, halting all vessels for search and perhaps— Well, this very *piragua* is commandeered, for good reasons. Did you search the cargo carefully, *capitán,* before it left here?"

"Qué dice? Left here?"

"Truly. It is the *piragua* of the late Jonás Losada, with his bales of hammocks—sent down by the governor of Amazonas."

"Hm!" repeated Paez, simulating surprise. But something in his eyes indicated that he had already recognized that returning boat. "No, the bales were not opened. You say there was an irregularity somewhere?"

Torre laughed lightly.

"I can tell you something—a little later. And about the cartridges you need— But perhaps we had best talk more privately."

He glanced at the shadowy listeners. Paez nodded, gaze going to Steele.

"At my headquarters. And this *señor?*"

"Señor Steele, of the United States of the North. He has business with one Enrique Hierro, said to live here. Is there such a one?"

"Hm!" Paez scanned the foreigner sharply. "*Sí,* Hierro is here. We shall pass his *casa.* This way!"

Leaving his soldiers still on guard, Paez walked toward the dim houses, Torre still beside him. Steele, without comment, followed. As they marched Paez again eyed Torre, then bluntly declared:

"I do not remember any Capitán Carvajal stationed at Apure."

"Naturally not. I was transferred there only two weeks ago," Torre answered easily. "And I hope not to remain long in this mosquito-cursed river region. I am of Valencia."

"Oh! *Sí?*" Life came into the other's grumpy voice. "A real town, Valencia! What did you do there, that you were sent to that Apure hell-hole?"

"Garrisons are being shifted."

They now had turned into a small plaza; the stereotyped square without which no Spanish settlement would consider itself a town. Paez halted at a door in a clay house. On it he hammered with his revolver butt.

After a scared silence it opened, revealing a shabby Indian girl with a lighted candle. At sight of the officers she recoiled a step; then stood dumbly waiting.

"*El señor!*" barked Paez.

"*No—no 'stá 'quí,*" she faltered. "He is not here—"

"Where?" he growled.

"*No—no sé.* I don't know."

"At the saloon, probably," rumbled Paez. "I will find him. This *señor* will wait here for him."

Forthwith he wheeled away. Torre, also turning, gave Steele one eloquent sidelong glance. Then the Southerners were marching away in the dusk, side by side, stride by stride, brothers in arms—perhaps. And the Northerner, smiling slightly at Paez's obvious haste to be rid of him, stood eyeing the dull-faced servant and awaiting the next move.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HOUSE OF HIERRO

EYES scrutinized Steele. Not alone the eyes of the terrified Indian slave, but other eyes behind her. Beyond the half-open door and the candle flame he could not see. But he felt the searching regard, just as a man alone in a dim forest feels the impact of invisible, inaudible minds within the skulls of suspicious animals—or savages. Before the stranger could fully register the impression he heard a low but imperative whisper:

"Admit the gentleman!"

The door swung fully open. The servant stepped back. Steele entered a narrow corridor. Nobody else was there. But from somewhere sounded a faint swish as of a vanishing skirt.

The door closed with a solid thud testifying to its weight and thickness. The servant walked into a doorway immediately adjoining, set the candle on a table, and clumsily went out. The visitor glanced around, sat in a chair, and again waited, meanwhile studying his surroundings.

Dull clay walls, very thick; heavy window shutter—probably bullet proof—closed; a door into some other room, also closed; and on that door a gaudy advertising calendar—with last month's leaf still in place. On the walls, equally garish pictures of queer foreign scenes, loudly colored, in flashy gilt frames, pendent from red ropes and gilded spikes. Interspersed with these were odd, bright bits of featherwork, evidently Indian—and, in their barbaric way, far better than the glassy chromos. Against one wall, an ornate piano, with red plush stool. Elsewhere, two or three stiff chairs, and the center table, on which, beside the candle, lay one lone book in a showy red-and-gilt cover.

Steele's brows drew down. This place, with its cheap ostentation and arrant

lack of taste, might readily be that of an Enrique Hierro, but not that of a Harrison Steele. Harrison, though a heedless youth fond of bright lights and dizzy blondes, had known good things in his own home and possessed some sense of fitness. This—

There the newcomer reconsidered, glancing around anew. This ostentation was not cheap; not here in Guayabal. That piano, those pictures, these chairs, bought somewhere far from here and transported so many leagues up the difficult Orinoco, were extravagantly expensive. Probably not another house here, or anywhere else for hundreds of miles, possessed one framed picture, or a real chair, or even a floor—except natural earth. This floor was of wood, tough, dark, well laid—in a region where existed no sawmills, no planes, no tools but *machetes*. Somebody had spent considerable money on this home. And who, up here, would require wood floors?

There again his thought halted. In the dark corridor had sounded footsteps, quick, hard, staccato. Now in the open doorway stood a brilliant woman.

For a moment she paused there, smiling. Bright red evening gown, cut very low; diamonds—or rhinestones—glittering at throat and wrists; teeth gleaming in her fixed smile—yes, she was brilliant. Even her feet, encased in highly polished shoes with high French heels, shone in the candle light. Against the dark background her skin looked pure white—except cheeks and lips, overdosed with hastily applied rouge.

This, then, was the unseen woman who had partly sized up the half-seen newcomer outside her door, ordered his admittance, and vanished to exchange her slovenly house dress for her best array. With inner aversion but outward courtesy the stranger said:

"Pardon, *señora,* I have perhaps intruded in the wrong *casa*. I was told that here I would find Señor Enrique Hierro, with whom I have some business."

"You are most welcome, *señor,*" she replied, caressingly. "This is the house of Señor Enrique Hierro. And the *señor* will arrive—perhaps—before long. While we wait, shall we—well—play the piano?"

Stopping very near him, she grinned again. Then, with a sudden twist of face and body, she was several feet away. The outer door had burst open.

The next instant Señor Hierro bulked in the hall doorway. Ugly-jawed, hard-faced, jealous-eyed, he loomed like a thundercloud full of lightning. Paez, or some messenger, had found him much sooner than his woman had expected.

Fat, black-mustached, flat-nosed, shaggy-haired, hatless, clad in baggy whites. Face smashed out of shape by somebody's fists somewhere, warped into other lines and angles and bulges by unbridled dissipations, yet retaining the Steele eyes and jaw. Body bloated to ungainly girth, yet supported by the Steele breadth of shoulder and length of frame. This was Harrison Steele, changed by South America and his own debauchery into Hierro, or Herrumbre. Good stuff, rotted. Rotted by what?

At the same instant both pairs of Steele eyes swung to the woman. Then they darted back, fixed again. And Hierro gulped, blinked, croaked:

"Hullo, Rod! What you doing here?"

"Hullo, Harry! Didn't they tell you who was here?"

"No! Only that a stranger was in my house and—"

His gaze swung again to the woman, taking in her flamboyant display. Abruptly he ordered:

"*Vete!* Get out!"

For a moment she stood obdurate, hateful anger plain in her face—which, Steele now observed, was so sallow as to betray mixed blood. Then, mouth hard, she flounced out, punching her high heels down with vindictive force.

"Well," growled Hierro, awkwardly, "sit down."

"Nice place you have here, Harry," said Steele.

"Good enough," countered the other. His look around, however, showed no pride in its elaborate furnishings.

"But you can change it for a better one if you like."

"Meaning what?"

"The firm of Steele Brothers is winding up its affairs. Your father and mine are dead; and I've decided not to carry on the business. Since you never took any interest in it, you probably don't care to run it now. In fact, you couldn't. You don't know the ropes. And business in general up there is quite erratic now anyway. So it's best to sell out and—"

"What's it worth?"

Steele withheld answer a few seconds, regarding the questioner with ill-concealed distaste. The hard, mercenary interruption jarred on him; so did the greedy look in the warped face. The death of the father who had repeatedly pulled Harrison out of disgrace or actual jail, who had finally sent him packing with a pocketful of money and the command to make a man of himself, meant nothing to Enrique Hierro—nothing but more money. But Rodney's reply was impersonal:

"About half a million, the appraisers think. Making your share about $165,000. That's approximate. There'll be expenses to deduct, too. But there are *bona fide* buyers in sight at that figure."

Hierro beamed. His gaze lifted, dwelt on the wall decorated by his flashy woman, as if looking through it to better things far away. Then he scowled, again confronting his visitor.

"How d'you figure that?" he demanded. "Half of half a million is a quarter million. That's $250,000, not $165,000. My father had a half interest—"

"No. A third."

The fat scowl deepened; the suspicious eyes narrowed to slits. Rodney Steele reddened angrily.

"Your father," he hit back, "had a half interest to begin with. But you, with your hell-raising and your blackmailing women, cost him so much that you broke him—or would, if my father hadn't stood by. To save the family name in business and otherwise, my dad took over shares he didn't want; and your father never took them back. They understood each other. But law is law, and you're entitled to one-third, no more. And, damn you, I'm sorry I ever took this trip to let you have any of it!"

He sprang up, kicking back his chair. The other lurched up in turn, face dark with rage. Steele against Steele, they glared at each other. Then suddenly the Steele who had become Hierro relaxed, grinning.

"Sit down, Rod," he invited, sinking back. "I don't doubt you. Only—a man gets suspicious down here. And this is all rather sudden to me. You understand, don't you?"

Mollified by the winning tone, Rodney resumed his own seat, somewhat ashamed of his own outburst.

"All right," he crustily conceded. "But that's how the business lies. And I have papers in my trunk to prove it. And, getting along with the business, you can sign off your interest to me now if you wish. It'll save time, and save you a long trip North if you've other things in mind. The money will be deposited to your account at, say, the Royal Bank of Canada branch at Ciudad Bolívar, down-river. Or elsewhere, if you say. That's up to you."

The other considered, his expression growing businesslike, yet not so crafty as before. Soon he said:

"That sounds sensible, Rod. But since it's business, I'd like to see your papers first. Where are they?"

"In my trunk," he stated. "On the boat. I didn't bring them up here because I wasn't altogether sure you were

my man. But I'll get them now."

"All right." Hierro heaved himself up; then paused. "By the way, just who is this Carvajal you're with? And what's he here for?"

For a moment Rodney Steele's breath halted. Temporarily he had forgotten El Halcón and his men, all marking time while the Northerner transacted his business; forgotten also that the Hawk was here partly, if not altogether, to obliterate one spot of rust, one Herrumbre, somewhere on the mental escutcheon of the proud Torre; forgotten even that Harrison Steele was Herrumbre. Now his answer was slow, perceptibly guarded.

"I don't know. He picked me up and brought me along. Local affairs don't interest me."

"Of course, of course. Well, Rod, let's go get a drink. Have you tried any Venezuelan rum? Man, it's the goods! Just one good snort together, and then we'll look at the papers."

Into the dark corridor they turned, seeing nobody. Indian slave and painted mistress were, if lurking and listening, invisible. With the same jerky haste Hierro yanked open the outer door, stood aside, letting his guest go first. Steele strode out—then stopped short.

Through the thick walls and dense shutter had come no outer sounds. But sudden turmoil had erupted in sleepy Guayabal. In the dusky plaza bare feet were running, dim shapes rushing, excited voices ejaculating half-heard calls which, to Steele, made no sense. The confusion did not seem to be a fight; rather, a disordered, blundering pursuit of somebody or something craftily dodging through the dark; and, with its strangely subdued noises, it seemed also an effort to avoid arousing other men not far away.

Then, while both men at the door peered and listened, came light and noise.

Over the town suddenly dawned a white shine which swept from side to side—the diffused glare of a searchlight. From the riverside broke a ragged racket of rifle shots. And from nowhere appeared El Halcón, breathing fast, sprinting past Steele with two words:

"Come on!"

Behind him burst a roar of voices no longer restrained; voices and gunshots. The shots came from the revolver of Capitán Paez, running heavily, panting loudly, shooting hastily now that he saw his prey. Torre spun sidewise, halted an instant, his own side-arm frozen at his hip. One shot crashed. Paez, like a punctured balloon, collapsed headlong.

Instantly the Hawk wheeled again, his gun now pointing true at Herrumbre, Hierro, Harrison Steele. But Rodney Steele was in the way. Over Torre's face passed a flash of demoniac rage. Then he was gone, the vengeful bullet unfired, speeding to his own men. From the port now clamored an uproar of shots, shouts, fierce combat.

Toward that port Rodney Steel took two long strides—no more. Heedless of the rabble behind him, forgetful of his decadent cousin, he started again toward where he meant to go. Then came chaos.

Something smote him horribly from behind. Staggering, swerving, facing about, he dimly saw the fat face of Herrumbre, fiendishly agrin; beyond it, vicious yellow visages full of enmity. Into that fat countenance he hurled both fists with retaliative hatred. It fell back. He stepped forward, determined to smash it out of existence. But something snakily encircled his feet—the yellow faces swarmed into his own—a horde of hellions battered and clawed and kicked him down—

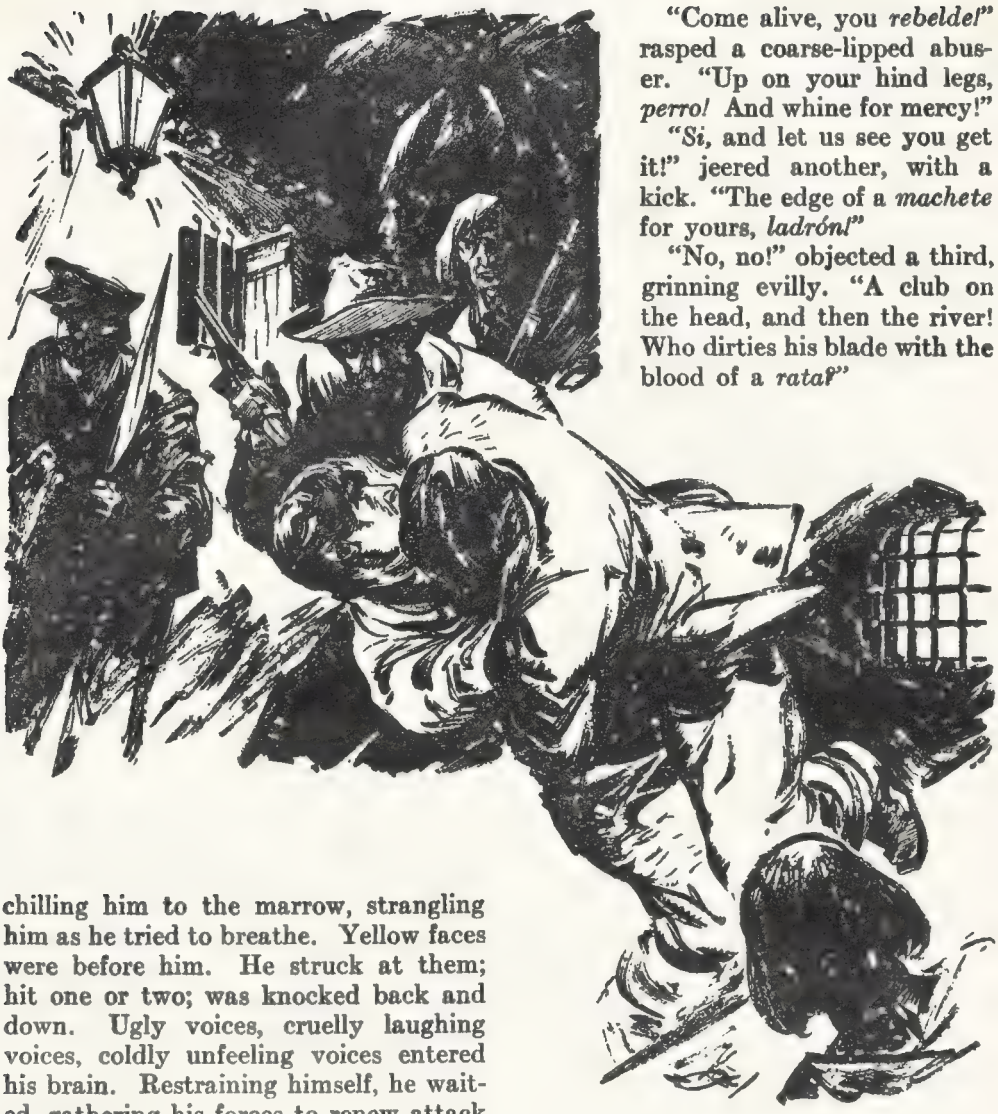
So he was gone.

CHAPTER IX

CONDEMNED

DULLY Steele came back. Dully, yet still fighting.

Brutal hands were hurting him. Water was sousing him,



"Come alive, you *rebelde!*" rasped a coarse-lipped abuser. "Up on your hind legs, *perro!* And whine for mercy!"

"*Si,* and let us see you get it!" jeered another, with a kick. "The edge of a *machete* for yours, *ladrón!*"

"No, no!" objected a third, grinning evilly. "A club on the head, and then the river! Who dirties his blade with the blood of a *rata?*"

chilling him to the marrow, strangling him as he tried to breathe. Yellow faces were before him. He struck at them; hit one or two; was knocked back and down. Ugly voices, cruelly laughing voices, coldly unfeeling voices entered his brain. Restraining himself, he waited, gathering his forces to renew attack when ready. But, when ready, he found himself still lost. Lost in a place and among people he had never before seen.

The place might be Guayabal; but the bare walls around him were not the ornate ones of Hierro's mistress. The men were not those of Torre, nor of Guayabal. Their faces were unfamiliar; their clothes cheap but uniform—and brown, not blue; uniforms of some military unit more modern than the latest one plundered by the raiding Hawk. Neither garments nor men were any too clean.

Harsh laughter sounded. Steele, now himself, sprang up, glaring. *Rebelde—perro—ladrón—rata*—rebel, dog, robber, rat— He struck furiously at the nearest enemy.

Instantly he was smothered in clutching arms, throttling hands, jamming bodies. Through the crush penetrated a sharp voice:

"*Basta!* Enough! Bring him in!"

"I'll say it's enough of that!" raged Steele. "Damn you all—"

A heavy hand slapped the rest back into his mouth. Other hands, gripping his arms, forced him through a doorway into another room. There a tall officer, lank as a shark and as slit-mouthed, stepped behind a crude table and sat down, eyeing the prisoner.

"*Cuatro,*" he clipped. "Four of you remain. Others out!"

Four men in semicircle flanked and backed Steele. Feet scuffed back through the doorway; the door bumped shut. Steele, looking around, saw only bare walls, earth floor, a heavy black iron chest at one side, a cheap hammock at the other, a few articles of military equipment hung on pegs. This obviously was the headquarters of the federals garrisoning Guayabal. And the shark-faced officer behind the table was as obviously the successor of dead Capitán Paez, who so recently had sat here with the pseudo—Capitán Carvajal.

"*Ahora,*" metallically stated that officer, "a full confession may save you much pain. Talk!"

Steele's jaw muscles bulged, his eyes blazed, but his mouth remained momentarily shut. Following the other's contemptuous gaze, he looked down at himself—to find himself in rags. Nor were they even his own rags. His clothing was gone, with everything in the pockets. Somewhere somebody had stripped him while he was senseless, pulled on him a coarse shirt and coarser pants, both tattered and dirty. Now he stood barefoot, bareheaded, bruised and bloodied; and, with his dark hair, brown eyes, and sun-browned skin, apparently a native—and a filthy one at that.

For a second something within him went cold. Then, chin up, he retorted:

"*Muy bien.* I am Rodney Steel, of the United States of North America, visiting this famous city on business. My business is with my cousin Harrison Steele, known here as Enrique Hierro. In a trunk on the *piragua* which conveyed me to this wonderful place are papers proving my business and my identity—including, of course, a United States passport bearing my photograph and signature. If you will have that trunk brought up here I will—"

He halted, hand automatically seeking his key-case, mind realizing anew his altered condition.

"My keys are gone," he lamely concluded. "So are my own clothes. But the trunk can be opened otherwise, no doubt. And then—" his temper blazed anew "—you'll do the talking, and some damned tall apologizing! Go get that trunk!"

The officer sat motionless, wordless, expressionless for a long minute. Only his eyes showed changes of impulse—incredulity, anger, wary consideration.

"*Teniente,*" he ordered, "send men to that *piragua* to find a trunk—if there is one."

The man at Steele's right wheeled away, went to the door, repeated the order, turned back, to receive another command:

"Find also Enrique Hierro."

That order also was relayed. Feet again shuffled. The door shut. Ensued a long pause. Throughout the wait Steele and the officer fronted each other with cold hostility, neither dodging the other's eyes. At length the door reopened. A blunt voice announced:

"*No hay*—there is no trunk."

Over the shark-like visage at the table flitted a coldly triumphant light. Mute, he waited for Hierro. Steele's mouth opened, closed, set in thin lines. After a time the door again squeaked open, and through it marched several feet. Another blunt voice declared:

"Here is Hierro."

"*Bien.* You may go," replied the officer.

Men went. Rodney Steele, wheeling

out of his immobility, fronted Harrison Steele. And Harrison, fat face unreadable, apparently met his kinsman's glare. His eyes, however, actually fixed themselves on Rodney's forehead.

"Señor Hierro, do you know this man?" demanded the officer.

"No!" came flat denial.

"No?"

"No!"

Rodney Steele sprang forward—only to be seized and yanked back by the ready guards.

Words failed him. Face congested, fists clenched, he struggled vainly. His cousin, holding his set gaze at the contorted forehead, continued his set speech to all hearers:

"No, and again no! This fellow came to my house tonight, pretending to be some relative of mine who needed money. How he came here I do not know. Who he is I do not know. I never saw him before tonight and I never wish to see him again. If there is any doubt of my loyalty—" here he squarely faced the officer "—I can prove it to the satisfaction of your superiors, *capitán!* Meanwhile there is some disorder in the town, and my *señora* is unprotected, and if you have no further need of me I will go. I repeat, I do not know this man."

The officer smiled slightly, as if more than ready to believe him.

"Very well, you may go," he responded. "If I want you again I shall let you know."

"But see here!" objected Rodney. "I demand that you—"

Bump! The door shut behind Hierro.

The officer rapped sharply on the table.

"Atención!" he rasped. "Waste no more of my time with clumsy lies! Tell truth—the whole truth—about your master and your fellow dogs, or *por Dios,* I will torture it out of you!"

His voice was merciless, his opaque gaze icy. As Steele glowered he added:

"Teniente, order a fire built and some irons heated—red hot!"

The captive took a grip on himself. Neck stiff, voice steady, he replied:

"You will regret this. There will be an international investigation, and the outcome will be extremely unpleasant for you. My story is this—no more, no less. Take it or leave it."

And, concisely, he described his journey up the Orinoco; his desertion by Borreguero, his rescue by Torre (whom he called Carvajal), his call on Hierro, his downfall on emerging from that treacherous house. Of Torre he said little, pretending still to believe the raider to be a real federal officer, maintaining that he knew nothing of that officer's business here. Throughout the narration the cold-faced judge sat unwinking, uninterrupting, regarding him with frozen intentness.

Only once he moved. At one point in Steele's story he glanced at his lieutenant and nodded slightly. The attentive subaltern stepped away, went somewhere, soon returned. When the Northerner stopped talking the captain regarded him critically; then shot an unexpected question:

"Where did you learn to speak Spanish?"

"In California, in my country. Why?"

The other did not say why. But the question showed that he now knew Steele to be a foreigner. Accent, pronunciation, even words were different from the Venezuelan river vernacular. Now he again nodded at his *teniente.* A moment later Steele, turning, faced another man summoned to verify or contradict his tale: Rubén Borreguero.

"Borreguero," crisply queried the officer, "do you know this man?"

"Sí, capitán! Him I have seen before, the filthy brute! On the *piragua* of the rebels—and one of them! The lowest of the lot, *por Dios!* He was the woodchopper for their cook—the scrubber of their deck—and the one who, as I have told you, swung the whip on me while the

others held me helpless and then left me for dead! Do I know him? *Sí*, I would know him in hell, where he belongs! And now, you—" he again confronted Steele "—where are my boat and my men? What did your hell-born Halcón do with them? Did you alone cut the throats of my boys, you *bastardo*, or did—"

Smack!

The evil voice ceased, the snarling face fell back, gushing red. Knocked senseless, Borreguero collapsed in a twisted huddle against the base of the farther wall. Steele had struck.

Temper exploding, the overworn prisoner had shot all nerve force into one demolishing blow into the hateful visage. Now for a second he stood still, eyeing his work. Around him stood men equally quiet, dazed by the suddenness of it all. Then eight hands seized him hard.

At the table the officer sat thinly grinning, watching the blood spread on Borreguero's shattered face. Apparently he did not think overmuch of the fallen man. Again his slit mouth turned contemptuous, his voice metallic.

"I have no more time for your stories," he announced. "You are evidently, as you say, a North American. But also some sort of North American criminal, driven out of your country and existing down here by joining other criminals. Many such creatures sneak into this country, and we know how to handle them—and you!"

He paused again. Steele, stony-faced, waited.

"Your threats of international inquiry would be laughable if they were not so stale," resumed the unfeeling voice. "Every disreputable *Norteamericano* caught in crime down here tries the same silly bluff. No doubt the police of your home would thank us for disposing of you. But since you are an alien all prudent allowances will be made. Until sunrise you will be confined here, *incomunicado*. At that time you will be formally shot."

Once more he paused, gaze boring into the brown eyes which continued to meet his own. Then he ended:

"If after thinking it over you wish to give me additional information you can tell your guard. It may make a difference—before sunrise. After that it will be too late. *Teniente*, take him out!"

The eight gripping hands, which had not once relaxed, turned the prisoner away from the table. Tight-mouthed, Steele marched without useless resistance to a doorway—not the same one by which he had entered.

CHAPTER X

AT SUNRISE

THE cell was small, damp, bare. Hard walls, clammy earth, some dry grass at one side, one window with stout bars—that was all.

Through the window came thin moonlight. Looking out, the prisoner saw the half-moon, newly risen, off to one side above the low roofs; another clay house-wall, completely blank, a rod or two distant; then, calmly patrolling, a sentry who gave him a chill gaze and walked deliberately past. A few yards away the fellow turned and plodded back, repeating his casual look as he again covered his set distance.

When the guard had gone by, Steele tested the bars. Although wooden, they were stout, strong, solidly set, and almost as hard as metal.

The returning sentry, somehow aware of his silent efforts, gave him this time a derisively sneering smile, which the captive ignored. Leaning on the barrier, the repeatedly betrayed traveler of the Orinoco contemplated the bare wall across the way.

That he would die at sunrise was indubitable. That shark-eyed, shark-mouthed officer had not once promised him life. His threats of torture had been real; his last hint at "a difference"

had been merely bait to catch a rat, if Steele were such. Whether or not the prisoner should confess anything worth knowing, his fate was sealed.

Steele drew back. The sight of the remorselessly watchful guard bothered him. Automatically he turned to the miserable bed of grass on the floor—then, smelling it, turned away. It stunk. Undoubtedly it also crawled. More than one poor wretch had lain there on his last night of life and, going out to death, left behind him things unmentionable. As far away from it as he could go, the latest prisoner squatted against a wall and stared at another, deliberately thinking—not of tomorrow, not of the present moment, but of recent yesterdays. As the moon rose higher and the walker outside swung back and forth he put together various pieces of a puzzle. At length he had most of the picture.

The oddly secretive journey up the river, with its off-river night camps, its frequent backward looks by Torre in daylight, fitted now into the smells of engine oil, the glare of the searchlight, the reappearance of Borreguero. El Halcón had sensed pursuit; and somewhere, somehow, vengeful federals had learned his whereabouts, acquired an engine-driven vessel—extremely rare on the Orinoco—and, still playing in luck, picked up Borreguero somewhere en route.

Driving on to Guayabal even after dark, they had apparently overwhelmed Torre's men and either exterminated or expelled them—probably the latter. Evidently Steele was the only captive taken. Therefore all survivors of the Hawk's force must be fugitives somewhere inland—or, more likely, dodging along down the shore toward Borreguero's hidden *piragua,* which, abandoned as useless, now might prove their salvation.

Meanwhile their own recent vessel was once again federal property—a barren prize except for its hammock cargo. And

Steele's trunk must be in the hands of his Judas of a cousin—as his keys and clothes undoubtedly were. How Hierro could have managed to abstract that trunk under the very noses of the federals Steele could not quite figure.

But the renegade Northerner evidently was of some importance here and in

good standing with the government officers. His cavalier attitude toward the examining captain showed that. And his haste to be gone showed to Steele, now, that he was eager to get at the papers in the trunk—or, if the trunk was not yet in his possession, to locate it. That scheme, the prisoner now saw, had been in the other's mind even before they left the house.

"If I were dead it would be all yours," the falsely grateful sneak had said. But his thought had been the converse: "If you were dead it would be all mine, instead of only one-third."

With that bitter reflection the prisoner arose and stepped again to the window. Outside everything was unchanged, except that the moon was higher. The town remained silent as a cemetery. The guard paced slowly up and down, gun loosely ready under an arm, sandaled feet noiseless, eyes glinting again at the battered face behind the bars. The fellow seemed expecting some words from the condemned man.

"Thinks I'll ask for a smoke or a drink or try bribing him," thought Steele. "Damned if I will! He can't get me out anyway, and I've nothing to bribe with. Besides, somebody's probably keeping tabs on him. To hell with them all!"

Turning back, he sat down against the door, far from the malodorous grass bed. The door moved a quarter-inch as his body pressed against it. At once it moved back, shoved by some one outside; and in the silence he faintly heard fingernails slide along the wood, reassuring another guard that a bar was firm.

So, through the last hours, he slept, unconsciously slumping down to rest on the dirt, stretching out for a time, then drawing himself together in a warmer huddle as chill dawn approached. When a foot kicked him awake he started up, scowled, grasped his surroundings, stood frozen-faced.

"Anything to say?" demanded an unshaven guard. Behind him, blocking the doorway, stood several others.

"*Sí! Vete al infierno!*" snapped Steele. "Go to hell!"

Among the men passed a crooked grin as the leader retorted:

"*Hoy por hoy?* Today? No! And with you? No, *quiera Dios!* Out with him, *hombres!*"

"Don't strain yourselves," advised the prisoner. "I can walk alone."

And alone, untouched, but closely guarded on all sides, he marched out into the plaza. There, somewhat to his surprise, he was shouldered aside, conducted around a corner, and walked down a narrow street toward the river.

Step, step, step—the hollow squad with its central victim marched to the edge. And behind that small body of killers, like carrion flies speeding to a ghoulish feast, flocked the population of Guayabal: all local denizens, all survivors of the recent Paez garrisons, all survivors of the newcome Shark-Face trailers. And at the river bank stood Shark-Face himself, evil eyed.

Wherever the captain had spent the night, he now was not the coldly correct officer last seen by Steele. Blouse unbuttoned, face sunken, eyes bloodshot, he swayed uncontrollably, exuding an odor of rum. As the captive was halted before him he raucously ordered:

"Tie him up!"

His head jerked toward a lone tree, short but stout. Steele protested:

"No! I don't need tying. I'm no dog. And *mira, capitán!* You can't do this, you know. Your duty—and your own safety—require you to take me alive down the river and hand me over to the proper authorities. To President Gomez, if you like, or to General Perez, governor of Bolívar State, where I landed. They will establish my identity and—"

A menacing movement and a hissing oath stopped him.

"*Maldito seas!*" raged the officer.

"Damn you, I can not do this? You shall see, *pronto!* To hell with Perez—*sí,* and with Gomez too!"

At that a gasping grunt passed among the listeners: a gasp of amazement, a grunt of half-scared disapproval. The red-eyed captain turned on all of them a twisted sneer.

"*Sí?*" thrust Steele. "What will Gomez do to you when he hears that?"

"*Nada!*" jeered the other, snapping his fingers contemptuously. "Nothing! The old thick-wit will believe the official report of my own *presidente.* I am no Gomez bootlicker. I work for Governor Boves—a better man than Gomez, *por Dios!* He should be the President of all Venezuela. And he will be, *muy pronto!* He—"

The epithets which rattled from the rum-loosed mouth were sheer filth. Then, gripping himself, he stood rigid, eyes fixed malevolently on Steele. When he spoke again his voice was controlled but vindictive.

"Tie him up!" he repeated. "And send for a *machete!*"

A low, understanding murmur ran around. The promise of shooting was tacitly retracted; instead, the captive was to be executed in true Orinoco style, chopped apart with a bush-knife. Instinctively warned, Steele sprang for the river.

Hands caught him, dragged him back from the brink, fighting hard but vainly. In that fleeting moment one part of his brain registered something half realized, dully puzzling, bitterly depressing. The Torre *piragua* lay tied hard against the bank—and, with it, only a gasoline launch, no larger than the sailboat.

No steamer was there, no other boat capable of carrying many men; only the motor vessel which, if crowded to capacity, could not have brought quite so many fighters as Torre possessed. But from that inferior force and the Guayabal garrison known to have sent away most of its ammunition the so-called Hawk and all his well-armed gang had fled!

Hauled back, heaved against the tree, looped fast by ready ropes, Steele looked for the first time at the small horde of human carrion-flies. And the same obscurely attentive part of his brain corroborated the first automatic calculation. The sweaty *soldados* of Shark-Face and the sloppily dressed gunmen of Paez only slightly outnumbered the Halcón raiders.

Now the soldiery formed an arc holding back the avid spectators. And for a moment all were quiet, while all awaited the arrival of the *machete* which would make the blood spurt with such spectacular zest. Then through the crowd came pushing a figure on which Steele's gaze fixed with utter ferocity. Into the open, shoving aside townsmen and gunmen alike, plowed Hierro.

Straight to Shark-Face he walked, face fixed in a heavy frown. Unshaven, unkempt, he looked sourly worried. And abruptly he demanded:

"Can't we postpone this?"

"*Porqué?*" snapped the captain. "Why?"

"I want to talk to this man."

"*Pues,* talk to him now! And make it fast! *Qué infierno!* Who in hell do you think you are, Hierro, that I should wait for you?"

The rum-reddened eyes glowered. Hierro turned hastily to Steele.

"Say, listen, Rod," he hurriedly said in English, "maybe I can pull you out of this if you'll just tell me where to find that trunk of yours. You know—the papers will show who you are, and—"

He hesitated, flinching a trifle as he caught the prisoner's glacial glare.

"So," mocked Steele, "you haven't got hold of them yet! And you think I'm fool enough to—"

Smack! Crack!

Something hit Hierro. Instantly followed the crack of a high-velocity rifle.

Hierro's jaw dropped. Into his face shot ghastly fear. Then he flopped headlong down.

Smack! Crack!

Shark-Face leaped convulsively into the air, collapsed into a sprawling nondescript on the ground.

Smack-crack! Smack-crack! Smack-crack!

Three other men spun around and fell. Steele, ears locating the keen explosions, eyes searching the high hill behind the flat settlement, saw the fifth shot wink out in pallid fire spurting from a black rock. Then, while the panic-stricken crowd whirled about:

*"Viva El Halcón! Tiranos Abajo!"**

The roaring war-cry burst from the houses of Guayabal. And like a roaring, flashing tropic thunderstorm bursting in full fury, lightning blades of death darted at the milling crowd. A blue cloud streaked with glittering steel rushed, struck, kept striking with astounding speed.

CHAPTER XI

NEW BUSINESS

THE thunderbolt attack ceased. Bodies strewed the field, leaking red on the brown ground. Splashes, swashes, yells for mercy rose from the river. Fierce-faced men in blue with crimson *machetes* held the battle-ground, flashing thin grins at the prisoner against the tree but leaving him there. With rifles snatched from the ground they guarded themselves, a few facing the town, the rest the river. And to the repeated appeals for mercy down below, the leathery first *sargento* of El Halcón laconically replied:

"We shall see."

From the hill came no more shooting. But from thereabouts El Halcón himself presently appeared, affectionately gripping a rifle at which Steele scowlingly squinted, then grinned: his own gun. With a nod at him Torre glanced keenly at Hierro and Shark-Face, then strode on to the river-edge. Sharply he called:

"You who love Governor Boves well enough to fight again for him, swim back to him now! You who will never again support him, come here!"

Up the bank came wet shapes, dripping, pallid, cleaned of sweat, dirt, allegiance to an authority they had feared. The Hawk eyed each grimly; then, nodding to his *sargento*, turned his back on them and strode to the body of Hierro. To an attendant private with a wet *machete* he ordered:

"Take it off!"

The *machete* rose and fell. The head of Hierro rolled aside from the severed neck. Obeying a nod from his commander, the chopper grasped the head and threw it into the river. The corpse followed.

"Sorry," said Torre, glancing at Steele. "A bit unpleasant for you, perhaps. But —I'll explain later. Meanwhile—" swiftly cutting the prisoner's ropes with a clean-bladed poniard—"take it easy. I still have a little business on hand. See you later!"

He wheeled away. Steele took a step, staggered, caught himself, slumped back against the tree. Reaction had hit him hard. And for a time, squatting with head hanging and eyes closed, he knew little of what went on around him. At length, feeling better, he straightened up, to find a Torre man standing by with a big gourd of water.

"When you are ready, *señor*," said the other, "*el capitán* desires you at headquarters."

"*Bueno!* And thanks!"

A long drink, a wash of head and hands, and he was again himself. As he started toward the plaza two men walked with him, carrying rifles.

"Am I again a prisoner?" he laughed.

"Hardly," denied one. "But there are

*"Long live the Hawk! Down with tyrants!"

snakes in this town. We will see to it that none strikes at your back."

The three walked on to a doorway, where stood two more riflemen. Steele walked in alone. Passing along a corridor, he entered a room unforgettably familiar. There, last night, he had stood a prisoner before Shark-Face, heard his sentence, gone to his death cell. There now, at the same table, sat Torre, busily calculating something on paper. Other men, handling various articles, droned reports. After a moment more of figuring Torre nodded and briskly arose.

"*Bueno!* That will do!" said he. "Load the launch! And now, old chap, how are you?"

"As you see," dryly replied Steele. "And you?"

"The same. Take a seat. Take the whole works! I'm through with it. And, by the way, here's your trunk—and gun and clothes." He gestured to a neat pile in a corner. "And thanks, most sincerely, for the use of the rifle!"

"You're most welcome," grinned the owner, sitting loosely down on the table. "And that rifle's yours—with my compliments and heartiest respect. But I'd like to know—"

"Thanks again," interrupted Torre. "I love that rifle. But I really don't need it now. If you haven't noticed—"

He pointed to rifles leaning against a wall. Steele, after one attentive look, slid off the table and, grasping one gun, inspected it. A military piece, almost new, it was far superior to the old-type lever guns hitherto borne by Torre's men. The others were identical. Peering at the factory mark, he made out: *Mauser-Werke A. G., Oberndorf.*

"Real Mausers," happily chuckled Torre, "not rebuilt post-war junk. They'll outrange my old-fashioned guns by about five times. And plenty of cartridges. Gifts from my worst enemy—he even sent them to me by river express! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

He laughed with joyous abandon; then, seizing Steele, swung him back to the table and companionably sat beside him, continuing:

"Now I know you're somewhat mixed up. And while the boys move things around I'll straighten things out between us. We're pulling out *pronto*. So listen—"

Steele listened, while men moved in and out and the explaining voice concisely clarified matters hitherto obscure. At times he glanced skeptically at the narrator, suspecting exaggerations; then, realizing anew the headstrong yet canny nature of the half-Spanish, half-American human hawk, realized also that he heard truth.

Some time back, a battered, black-browed man apparently of Spanish extraction, calling himself Hierro, had drifted into this country, joined an outlaw gang, fought the government until captured; then saved himself by turning against his former comrades, taking an oath of allegiance, and keeping it for his own good. For a time he was merely a carter on the overland road at Guayabal; later a saloon-keeper; then a spy of the far-away but watchful government at Caracas, keeping an eye on its remote but valuable back districts up the Orinoco.

For some time, however, Hierro was not too hard on incipient or actual rebels going up or down the river road, especially if they were free-handed with money at his rum-shop. In the old Spanish way he played both ends against the middle, acquiring considerable money and an apparently satisfactory mistress, all according to custom. Meanwhile the boys outside the law traveled through on their own errands. No large bodies of armed guerrillas went through Guayabal. They circuited the place, so that Hierro ostensibly knew nothing about them—although somehow he grew richer all the time. In short, he was not a bad fellow.

But then he tightened up. Men going through paid more and more. And outlawed outfits operating far from Gua-

yabal were somehow betrayed and exterminated with, in some cases, prolonged anguish. This also was more or less according to custom, the degree of inhumanity depending on the natures of the state governors—each a minor *presidente*. The connection between these betrayals and Guayabal was not yet clear.

But then two brothers in the force of El Halcón received word, through the inexplicable but efficient wilderness telegraph, that their father was dying away up the Orinoco. And, with the underlying sentiment of the toughest Spanish killer, they answered the call of their blood. Plentifully supplied with money by El Halcón, they made their way upriver, paid handsome toll to Hierro—but then were seized and held for torturous grilling about the Hawk. One died with his mouth shut. The other, managing somehow to escape, succeeded in returning to Torre. Whereupon the Hawk despatched up the river a written message, to be nailed in the dead hours of night to the door of the house of Hierro:

> "I will take your head. You know why. El Halcon."

And—

At that point Steele broke in:

"Oh, say! You didn't really do that?"

"What? Warn him? I always do that! I am no assassin!"

Torre's tone was a trifle vexed. And the doubter, remembering Hierro's uneasiness concerning the apparently authentic "Carvajal," doubted no more.

"The same message went to Governor Boves years ago," added the avenger. "And he knows that one day I will keep my word—as I now have kept it to Hierro, to the very letter. And, by the way, if you thought my action in taking off that head was merely savage vindictiveness you're wrong. The moral effect on my own men and all other men—including officials—will be far greater than if I'd only shot him and let him lie. Hereafter my enemies will think a long time before they try torturing a man of El Halcón!

"But, to get on—"

Because of some disorder in the upriver region Captain Paez had been sent to Guayabal with a small detachment, extra rifles to arm picked local men, and plentiful ammunition for all. To El Halcón, however, this adventitious protection of Hierro was not a deterrent but an added incentive to attack the place. He desperately needed cartridges. So—

"Wait a minute," demurred Steele, puzzled. "You mean—"

"I mean," coolly explained the raider, "that aside from my own pistol cartridges I had less than a hundred rounds for my whole gang. Only about three bullets per man. So my job was to replenish my supply at the expense of Paez and the government—as usual."

"Well, I'm damned!" marveled the Northerner.

With this revelation he fully understood all unexplained oddities of the voyage—the hunger in all men's eyes as they viewed his own comparative wealth of ammunition, the dismay with which those men heard that Paez's supply was meager, the tricky attack on the Borreguero *piragua* which might conceal armed enemies. Truly, the hawk-men could not afford to fight except in desperate extremity.

"And with those few bullets you expected to capture this place?"

"I had intended," explained Torre, "to land below here—out of sight, of course—and, by a night march or two, to seize the town with practically no gunfire. We are used to night work, and can manage it very quietly if all goes well. But for the sake of your business I decided on bluff. I made Paez believe I was bringing him more ammunition—ha!—to be unloaded in the morning. And I was just about to suggest an immediate inspection of his present stock—and, if it was produced, to put my gun in his ribs—when things went wrong. A man came

in, said something very low—and Paez turned on me. I legged it for the open—and spied the searchlight coming. After that— You know."

"Some," nodded Steele. "But my light went out when you turned the corner."

"Well," grinned Torre, "I have to own up to sneak-thievery at your expense. I stole your trunk—"

"You?"

"I. Moreover, I had picked the lock—or jammed it—before then. Or rather, one of my boys did it by my order. The last time you had it open I distracted your attention while he slid back your

self-locking bolt, wedged it with a knife-point, and broke off the point. So when you thought you had snapped it tight you hadn't. Also, per order, the boys put your trunk and rifle into the canoe as soon as you and I left the *piragua* last night, and two of them sat ready to paddle if necessary. Things were hanging by a hair, and I might need your cartridges. As it turned out, I did."

He chuckled gaily, continuing:

"Those two men shoved off the minute they spied the searchlight coming, and in the excitement they got ashore unnoticed downstream. We shot while we could and ran when we couldn't. We're all pretty good runners. 'He who fights and runs away—' You know. We're also pretty good hiders. And this morning you furnished the right diversion to hold all eyes while we got into position for fast work with the good old cold steel, covered by a little preliminary target shooting for moral effect. Your clothes, by the way, were at—"

"Wait a minute! Why didn't Shark-Face guard that hill?"

"Who? Oh! Ha! Good name for him!" laughed Torre. "He did guard it; had a whole squad up there all night. But we gathered them in by some soft walking and a stab or two. As I was saying, your clothes were at Herrumbre's house. The —ah—lady there gave them to me very graciously. Perhaps you should call. She doesn't like me."

"No? Why not?"

"Oh, I was too busy to be entertained —then or later. But you've nothing to do, so—"

He grinned wickedly. Steele snorted. Torre laughed aloud.

"Not interested?" he gibed. "What else can I offer you?"

"What else have you?"

El Halcón slid off the table. With grandiloquence he intoned the old Spanish formula:

"This poor house of mine is yours, *señor,* with all it contains. And," significantly, "anything outside that I control."

His gaze moved to the Mausers, then back to the brown eyes which also contemplated the captured arms. Behind his jesting words, Steele knew, waited readiness to renew his bygone proffer of comradeship in his lawless yet manly force; an offer no longer actuated by warlike exigencies but based on the liking of man for man. And the guns themselves, won by sheer hardihood, mutely promised new adventures, hairbreadth hazards, daring gambles with death on wide prairie or rocky river.

Into the bruised face of the Northerner came again the glow of dreams—now at last attainable. Straightening, he stood looking down into the dark-blue eyes which smilingly yet searchingly met his own. And seriously he said:

"I'll take you up on that. My business is done—or can be done by cable or mail, if you know trusty routes—"

"I do," interpolated Torre.

"And then the lawyers can attend to their job without me. I've been tied too long to business; never had a break except hunting trips and rifle tournaments; and now I want some real life! I don't care to shoot any real Gomez men down here—they've never hurt me. But according to all I've heard your Governor Boves is a thorough-going snake, scheming to ruin Gomez himself; and I've got some personal satisfaction coming to me from his gang, federal soldiers or not. So if you're willing to let me trail along with you—"

He paused. Torre half nodded.

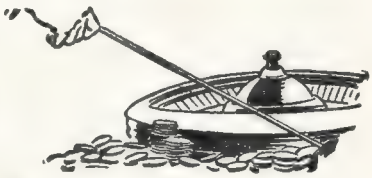
"Boves," he stipulated, "is my own meat. But whatever you do to his hirelings will never hurt my feelings. And whatever entertainment I can manage to stir up for you will be—*Qué hay,* Pablo?"

"La lancha," repeated a blue-clad man. "The launch is ready to go."

"Bueno! Take out the trunk and gun of *el señor,* and see that all these other things are put aboard. Come on, Steele!"

Side by side the two swung out along the corridor. As they emerged into the plaza Steele stared, then laughed. Once again he heard from the born actor beside him hoarse tones saying:

"Uh-huh. Thought yuh'd decide to join up with us, buddy! And you're just the kind of a fella we want—and a wise guy to know what you want! No work—no rent to pay—good eats if you can find 'em—good chances of gettin' shot—Join the gang and see how yuh like it!"



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PROBAK JUNIOR

ON THE PROD

The life story of a Texas bad man

By Clyde Wantland

CHAPTER I

A KILLER IN THE MAKING

THE spring term of district court in Bastrop, Texas, opened on a day in March.

The judge entered the room. The sheriff removed his hat, as did the spectators and lawyers. Smokers took a last drag at their cigarettes and crunched them out. Tobacco chewers got near cuspidors. Then all was quiet and the sombre judge mounted the bench.

"Order in the court!" bellowed the sheriff; then he walked around the end of a pine table serving as the prisoners' dock. From his belt he took a key and unlocked a pair of handcuffs as the wearer glowered at him.

"Stand up!" the sheriff directed his prisoner.

Ben Thompson, the local bad boy, raised himself from his seat, sullen, resentful, his black eyes blazing, his abnormally large head tilted forward. The sheriff had dealt with him as a prisoner for three months and knew that only rough handling sufficed.

The widow Thompson had no money for the defense of her fourteen-year-old son, so the court appointed R. T. Brownrigg to defend him, selected a jury of twelve men and ordered the trial to proceed. Ben took the stand.

"Why did you shoot Theo Brown, your playmate?"

"He dared me to."

"But why did you shoot to hit him?"

"Hell, that's what you shoot for, ain't it—to hit? Damn a feller that shoots to miss"

Then and there Ben Thompson outlined a code that was to become a settled principle of his living and make of him the rowdiest, flashiest, possibly the most ruthless killer that ever blasted his way into the hall of infamy in the Southwest.

The jury found him guilty as charged and sentenced him to an indefinite term in the Texas reformatory, the maximum they could assess. In less than a year, however, his mother secured for him a pardon from Governor W. H. Runnels, had him released, and thus turned loose on a helpless public her totally unmanageable, incredibly vicious, straight-shooting, absolutely fearless son.

On his release he went to Austin, resuming his trade as a printer's devil, apprentice gambler, embryo gunman. A kid with bad points—plenty of them—but lots of good points, also, the chief one of which won him many fast friends: He was a man's man and his word was good. In all his stormy, tempestuous, bloody career he never took a dime in a crooked game; he never killed except face-to-face, toe-to-toe. His was a hard code, but he never violated it.

BEN THOMPSON had been living in Austin about a year, working as a printer's devil, gambling a little, observing a lot, riding through the matchless hills to the west and north in his spare time; practicing, practicing, always practicing plain and fancy shooting. Dreaming, no doubt, what he would do if the Comanches made a raid on Austin while he was there. The Comanches raided and Ben Thompson made his dreams come true.

It was the fourth night of the full moon in September, 1858, when a blood-curdling gobble announced that raiders had struck the western edge of sprawling Austin. The screams of women and children, the flares of burning buildings, told of their work.

Ben Thompson was playing his pennies at a monte place on Capitol Avenue when the alarm was sounded. The other men scrambled for their Winchesters; Ben Thompson appears to have had his ready. The others were confused, stampeded; Ben Thompson appears to have remained calm, cool, methodical.

The other fighters rushed for the scene of the raid; Ben Thompson saddled his horse at the livery stable and struck a course out of town to the northwest; he knew the Comanches hit quickly, got away quickly. He knew they came in through Packsaddle Pass; he knew that was the only way for them to return.

How Ben Thompson, printer's devil, knew all this fighting lore of the Comanches can only be explained by assuming he had the developed instinct of the natural born fighter. Anyhow, when the raiding Comanches arrived at Packsaddle Pass about daylight the next morning, Ben Thompson, alone, was there to mix it with them.

There were sixteen bucks in the party; they had five white children captives. Ben Thompson heard a kid yell and he pitched into the Comanches.

He killed the leader with his first rifle shot, stampeded their horses, closed in, and emptied his six-shooter, never touching one of the five children captives. The startled Comanches fell back and Ben Thompson held the pass until two hours later, when a half-hundred other men arrived from Austin, annihilated the raiders and returned the five children to their homes without a scratch.

That was the last Indian raid made into Austin.

The residents of Austin acclaimed the printer's devil now as their hero. Fighting men admired this stripping Bastrop lad who had killed five Comanches single-handed and held the pass until help arrived. Ben Thompson had struck his stride and had every reason to believe

he had in him the makings of a prime fighting man.

CHAPTER II

EMIL DE TOUR

WITHIN a year Thompson tired of the humdrum, monotonous life of the Texas capital; there were no fights but street brawls, and he was barred from them—none of the rowdies would take on this strapping young giant, now grown to a well-bunched, lithe, one hundred and ninety pounds of dynamite.

So Ben Thompson decided to see some of the world. He went to New Orleans, got a job in the commercial job office, setting type, saved his money, and bought passage on a ship for California. But, in celebrating his take-off, he missed his ship and about midnight started back to his room.

On the omnibus which he entered was a gay party of revelers, chief among whom was the bully of Canal Street, Emil de Tour, a strapping Redbone from one of the inland parishes, who had been going big in the Crescent City.

Tradition has it that Emil de Tour made a drunken pass at a girl not a member of the party. The girl resented it; Ben Thompson dealt himself a hand; knives flashed, women screamed; the omnibus was emptied in a twinkling—all except Emil de Tour, who writhed on the floor with a shattered jaw and a slash in the belly.

Ben Thompson went back to work in the Commercial office; Emil de Tour went to the hospital and recovered. In about three months he set out to find the Texan who had humiliated in this manner the bad man of Canal Street.

Thompson was not hard to locate. The outraged Louisianan challenged Thompson to a duel. Thompson, as the challenged party, had the right, under the code, of choosing the weapons.

"Six-shooters at ten paces."

But de Tour and his seconds were horrified. Six-shooters! They were the weapons of commoners and barbarians; no gentleman would fight a duel with six-shooters—especially with a barbarian from Texas!

"Well, what then?" Asked the accommodating Thompson. Now there was one weapon Emil de Tour was good with—swords.

"That'd be nothing but a damn footrace," Thompson replied. "I don't believe your man wants to fight."

They now taunted Thompson for his refusal. Finally he got tired of the foolishness and made this proposal:

"Make it swords then—short swords. Give me one; give him one. Lock us both up in a darkened cellar room; only one comes out. That'll be a fight, not a running match."

Thompson broadcast these terms and there was nothing now for de Tour and his seconds to do but accept or lay down. They accepted.

The room was in an old basement off Canal street. The combatants were given their weapons; their friends closed the door; the room was pitchy black. Thompson stepped to the right, de Tour to the left. A deadly silence settled down; the friends outside listened.

"Are you ready?" asked Ben. De Tour fell into the trap and struck where the voice was and cut thin air only; for his mistake he received a thrust that put the short sword entirely through his abdomen. Then the two men clinched.

About five minutes later a knock on the door announced that the fight was over. The door was opened and Ben Thompson emerged, his hands gory, his head matted, his thigh and left arm gaped open, his clothing gone.

Emil de Tour was literally cut to ribbons, pierced through in a dozen places, stone dead.

The fight created a sensation in New Orleans and the city felt itself outraged, losing its local champion to a wild man

from Texas. Authorities swore out a warrant for the arrest of Ben Thompson, and to make it worth while for the officers to take the necessary risks in serving this warrant a reward of $500 was offered.

Thompson fled to the Sicilian quarter, where he was received with open arms, as befitting a master in the art of knife-fighting, by subjects who were no slouches themselves.

Rumors circulated around New Orleans that the officers had located the knife-wielding Texan but wouldn't go in after him, as his Sicilian friends had given him a dozen knifes with which to resist arrest. The reward was increased to $1,000.

But Ben despaired of anything happening, so he had his friends paint him a Sicilian hue, give him Sicilian clothes, and he escaped across the river to Algiers, mounted a mule furnished him and proceeded to Berwick's Bay, thence to Houston, overland, and to Austin.

AT THE end of another year Austin was again unbearably monotonous to Ben Thompson and he was becoming restless when the Civil War broke out. Ben didn't know what causes were involved but he did know that here was likely to be fighting on a grand scale, provided he got into the right outfit.

When Col. R. Baylor was authorized to raise a regiment of rangers, Thompson decided here was his chance; no one yet had ever followed Old Man Baylor that didn't sooner or later run bang up on a good fight, so Thompson enlisted with him.

Baylor's regiment was ordered to New Mexico and, enroute, stopped over at Fort Clark for a payday and rations.

Ben had planned to deal the boys a little monte that night, but when he went to draw some candles he was told by the commissary sergeant, Billy Vance, there were no more candles for issue. Ben looked around the tent, and lying outside by the sergeant he saw an issue of candles and bacon.

"Who is that issue for?" he asked.

"For the laundress," replied sergeant Vance.

"No," said Ben, "they're for your Uncle Benjamin Thompson," and he took them.

The sergeant remonstrated, drew his pistol, but too late; his ball hit the ground; Ben Thompson's ball went through the sergeant and through the leg of another soldier.

The shooting brought Lieut. John Haigler and a guard detail, and the accepted version of the fight is that the enraged officer started to strike Thompson with his sword; at any rate Ben fired again, and the Lieutenant fell with a bullet through his neck and the base of his skull.

The guard detail fell back and Ben took cover inside the tent.

"Who will you surrender to?" a sergeant called.

"To Captain Hamner only," Ben replied.

Captain Hamner arrived. Ben gave up, handing his smoking revolver to the captain.

Captain Hamner didn't know how to hold this vicious soldier to avoid a possible escape and more killing, so he made a special stall for him in the guardhouse at Fort Clark and chained him securely to the floor, flat on his back.

A month passed and Ben Thompson was forgotten by the higher authorities and never brought to trial. The skin was worn off his back; the flesh was eating away; he was slowly dying. So he induced a friendly guard to give him a match and some kindling and one night he set off a blaze that burned the guardhouse down.

The desperate man was ordered rescued before the flames licked up to burn him to death; he had bluffed and won,

but had calmly staked his life on doing so.

While they were debating what to do now with this incorrigible man, smallpox broke out in camp. The only treatment at that time for this scourge was isolation, so the one victim was taken a mile up the wind from camp, and a volunteer sought to nurse him.

Ben Thompson agreed to risk smallpox and was sent with the victim to his isolation post. Every day a sentry would be sent within calling distance to see if the first victim was dead and if Ben was stricken. The attack, however, proved to be very light and both nurse and patient got along fine, but the opposite idea was daily conveyed to the sentry.

Then, when both were well and sound, Ben slipped down one night to camp, stole two horses and packs, and the pair deserted Fort Clark.

During the remainder of that twelve-months enlistment, Thompson remained on the dodge, visiting various army camps, dealing a little monte, having a good time. Real war fighting had not yet hit Texas, and only routine police duty engaged the troops. At the expiration of his enlistment period, however, he sought out his old superiors and made a dicker with them not to court-martial him provided he re-enlisted.

The officers were glad to strike this bargain. Texas was now preparing to move against the enemy and fighting men like Thompson were wanted.

He came to San Antonio and was enlisted in the command of Captain William G. Tobin on the day the oufit was moved against Galveston to take that strategic post from the Federals.

At Galveston, Texas troops won their first victory of the war—a victory that swept the regular Union troops off their feet. This was their first taste of the orthodox Texan in action with his wild yells, his slashing knives, his rampaging horses, his spouting six-shooters. Thompson was in the thick of this sanguinary battle.

The regular Texas troops were never formally enlisted along military lines; they were permitted to fight in their own peculiar way, which was that of the guerrilla brush fighter. Thompson followed the guerrillas into Louisiana, where he had fighting enough to gratify even his lusty apetite. Finally he was incapacitated through five bullet wounds, exposure to the Louisiana swamps, and the general hardships of that campaign. He was furloughed early in 1863 and returned to Austin to recuperate.

Various sources and friends credit him with killing from ten to thirty of the enemy in this tour of duty; certainly he covered himself with war glory. But, inasmuch as this killing was done legally, in line of military duty, the number will not be counted in this record.

CHAPTER III

GONZALES

RECUPERATING a short time in Austin, Ben Thompson then married Stella, the daughter of Martin Moore, a rancher. Then, having heard that Colonel John S. (Old Rip) Ford was recruiting a company of rangers for duty along the lower Rio Grande, Thompson enlisted with this outfit.

By this time the Nueces Strip had become the most strategic point in the South. The Federals had successfully blockaded all other southern ports—the Nueces Strip was really the back door of the Confederacy, their only contact with the outside world.

Millions of bales of cotton and other merchandise were freighted across the Nueces, found its way to Brownsville, thence to the bay, where scores and hundreds of ships awaited to carry it to England and other countries in exchange for much needed ammunition and supplies.

Big money was changing hands along the Rio Grande then. Picked Federal cavalry swarmed the south bank of the Rio Grande to intercept this traffic; picked Texas troops swarmed the north bank to protect it.

And of all the famous fighting commanders sent to the lower country by Texas at that time, none could strike such awe to the heart of an enemy as could Old Rip Ford. He was given major credit for wresting the heart of that empire back from the redoubtable Cortinas three years earlier; he was the nemesis of the renegade Indians and black men who had refugeed to the Mexican border states of Coahuila and Tamaulipas.

So when Ben Thompson joined up with this outfit and the command moved to Eagle Pass, there was every reason to expect some more first-class fighting at once.

On arrival at Eagle Pass the outfit was joined by Billy, the younger brother of Ben Thompson, slightly less spectacular, slightly less known to the outside world, but not one whit inferior to his older brother either in fearlessness or fighting ability.

Just the mere presence of Old Rip Ford and his famed band of warriors seemed to have a becalming effect on the whole area. The Federal cavalry found business farther down the river; the raiding bands from Coahuila took refuge farther back from the border. This left Old Rip Ford nothing more interesting to do than keep pacified his turbulent fighters, keep them in check until a worthy foe presented himself.

Commanders from the time of Sam Houston had found it harder to hold in check a bunch of Texans looking for a fight than it was to whip an enemy, and Old Rip Ford was no exception. At the end of a week his men were breaking the bounds of the reservation on this side; going singly and in pairs across the river to Piedras Negras, opposite Eagle Pass, terrorizing that bustling city and making of themselves a nuisance in general.

Finally, one night, a group of Texan officers were called over to quell a disturbance. Captain Andy Ware and his detail located the seat of the disturbance to be in the famed El Conejo bar; and, of course, right in the midst of the hell-raising at El Conejo was Ben Thompson, out for a large evening.

When placed under formal arrest and ordered back to the Texas side of the river, Ben Thompson slapped Captain Ware down with his six-shooter, took a random shot at the guard, intimidated the Mexican *rurales* who had arrived on the scene, and presently had El Conejo all to himself and his rowdy friends.

When he sobered up the next morning, Ben decided to come across the river to Eagle Pass and surrender to his superiors. But while being ferried across the river his mind went back to that time in Fort Clark two years ago when he had been made to feel the harsh discipline of Colonel Baylor—and Colonel Ford was even more harsh in his discipline! He had to be; he, like Baylor, handled fighters that required it.

Ben was by now famed as a high-handed, turbulent person; Colonel Ford would no doubt make of him an example. Under wartime powers, of course, striking a superior officer was punishable at the discretion of a court martial with any sentence up to death, and Ben knew it. Death he didn't fear, but arrest and confinement he did. So he decided to stay on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande. He had the boatman turn around and punt him back to Piedras Negras, got drunk again, and decided to turn outlaw. There seemed little else to do; troops on both sides of the river had orders to take him in.

A plan was hatched that day to rob the Confederate customs house in Eagle Pass. There were others in Piedras Negras in Ben's predicament—wanted

on both sides of the river. Money was now getting scarce; in fact there was little else but Confederate scrip for them to use and you couldn't play that in monte games without a fight.

The customs house was loaded with gold, good hard gold money, paid in duties for the enormous traffic in cotton and merchandise. So a half-dozen hard-bitten men turned outlaw and decided to rob the Confederate bank.

Ben was taken in on all the plans; no doubt passed on the details. The robbery was to be that night. Ben crossed the river stealthily, entered Eagle Pass from below to reconnoitre. He had sobered up for this job—there was not less than $25,000 at stake.

Sober, desperate, dangerous, he approached the customs house from the rear to get a final close-up of the layout. As he circled around to the side to complete his inspection for the robbery that night, he came into view of the flagpole from which fluttered the battered, ragged emblem of the Confederacy, and Ben Thompson changed his mind.

He had followed that flag into battle at Galveston, in Louisiana; the thing, right or wrong, was in his blood. He had heard now that the cause was lost, and the South was fighting with its back to the wall. Ben Thompson was not a traitor.

He crossed back to Piedras Negras, sought out his confederates, told them of his change of heart.

"I can't go through with it," he said.

They finally agreed to select a new leader and go ahead with the job.

"We'll miss you, Ben," they said.

He smiled grimly. "No you won't—if you try to rob the customs house. Call it off; it ain't right."

"Who in the hell are you, Ben, to be preachin' about right and wrong?"

"Call it off, boys; I'll figure out some other way to make money."

"No, Ben—you may get chicken-hearted—"

A man clapped his hand over the speaker's mouth. "Don't call Ben Thompson that, you damn fool."

But the damage had been done. Ben's enormous, shaggy, dark head was lowered; he slid, crouching into a corner, his twelve-inch Bowie knife unsheathed.

"Who said that?" he roared and waited—"Who said that?"

The roomful of tough characters huddled, backed away. Ben Thompson was on the prod and every one was more than willing to give him plenty of elbow room. Presently his anger subsided sufficiently for him to make a little speech that in later years was to win him thousands of friends and defenders when other thousands regarded him as just another blood-thirsty killer.

"Boys," he said, "some of you took the same oath I did—to fight for the Confederacy. Right or wrong, an oath's an oath. You might go ahead and rob that customs house tonight, like we'd planned; but when you do, you'll lick Ben Thompson first. Now, all you boys that's with me, come over here to this corner; all you that's agin me, get set."

His brother Billy stepped to his side, as did Julius Brown; the others scurried for cover. The custom house job was never pulled.

WITHIN less than a month after arrival in Eagle Pass as a member of Old Rip Ford's famous rangers, Ben Thompson, with his positive genius for getting into complications, found himself virtually an outcast. The established law on either side of the river was anxious to gather him in; now the outlaw element had him marked as a traitor.

Having exhausted all the possibilities of Eagle Pass for varied sorts of trouble, he decided to try his luck farther down the river, in the vicinity of Laredo.

The once buoyant, flashy youngster now underwent a protracted period of the most intense mental agony. Accord-

ing to the code he was a traitor to his outlaw friends with whom he had voluntarily cast his lot. But it was either be a traitor to them, or traitor to the ragged flag under which he had fought; making a decision like this has a way of upsetting men like Ben Thompson.

He was penniless; for days he went hungry and drinkless around Piedras Negras. Life's terrific drama sapped his vitality and he no longer seemed to care. He, his brother and friends became virtual vagabonds for about two months.

Then Ben snapped out of it. If he could go to Nuevo Laredo he believed he could get staked to a monte game and make a comeback. But the fare on the stage was ninety dollars per person, gold. Ben went to the stage agent.

"There's three of us want passage," he said, "but I'll pay you the full fare of all of us and give you a hundred dollars bonus within a week after you get us down there—that is, if you'll land us there two days before the next soldier payday."

"Sorry," said the agent, "but the line ain't runnin'."

"What's the matter—you quit?"

"Yep—outlaws. We been stuck up every trip this last month."

Ben Thompson said, "you load your coach with all the gold you got to carry. Me and my two *compadres* will see that you get through."

"What's your name, son?"

"Ben Thompson."

The agent for the stage line could hardly believe that the ragged, unkempt youth before him was the one he had heard so much about. But he investigated, found out that Ben had refused to rob the customs house, that his word was good as gold, and that if Ben Thompson promised to see the cargo of gold through, there would be no double-crossing and there would more than likely be no robbery.

Ben's stand on robbing the customs house now paid him its first dividend. He was taken at his word. The stage was loaded and word was circulated around town that Ben, Billy and Julius Brown were riding the stage as guards. No robbery was attempted.

On arrival at Nuevo Laredo, Ben met Joe Buck, who had seen him in action at Fort Clark. Joe had been prospering and banked Ben three hundred dollars. That night he opened his game.

In his desperation he did something that very few American dealers ever do —he let the Mexicans buck his game. It was and still is a tradition along the border that no American dealer can survive all night if he throws his game open to Mexican players.

But Ben Thompson let them play as long as they had money. He won on every catalogued bet; he won on every freak; he could and did win with anything. By morning he had twelve hundred dollars' profit. He repaid Joe Buck, cut the profits in half with his backer, paid the stage man every cent he had promised and still had left enough to deck himself out in regulation border finery common to the professional gamblers and bank his own game.

He crossed over to Laredo the following day. In this little town on the Texas bank of the Rio Grande was stationed Captain Santos Benavides and his command of *Tejanos* (Texanized Mexicans) who had been mustered into the Texas service to patrol the Laredo area.

The soldiers were due to get their pay tomorrow, but they wanted to buck this game tonight; the accommodating Ben, pressing his winning streak, made them a lay-out and let them play their weapons and equipment.

Their pistols were rated for play as follows: Colts, $18, Remingtons, $22, and the self-cocking kind used by the Federal troops, $16.

Gradually the sums advanced on the weapons came back to Ben Thompson. As the weapons were handed in, Ben had Julius Brown take them away and hide

them for safe keeping. By midnight, Captain Benavides troops were gunless and the game broke up.

THE thorough cleaning given Captain Benavides' troops was the talk of Laredo the following day. The soldiers, having been disciplined for losing their weapons, were surly and resentful; Thompson was warned not to bank a game for them again that night.

But they were paid in good gold late that evening and in a body, repaired to the house just off Market Plaza, where they found Ben Thompson awaiting them, flanked on one side by Julius Brown and on the other by his brother Billy.

Ben, tonight, was in his glory, in the best of fettle. He was dressed in a high plug hat, a forked tailed coat, striped trousers, embroidered boots—all the trappings of the professional gambler.

No sooner had the men filed in than Ben knew trouble was bound to come that night. Not only were the private soldiers back and all of them with guns; there also accompanied them some of their hard-boiled non-coms and one officer, Lieut. Martino Gonzales, come along to see that his men got the breaks.

The room was banked full of these grim men; Ben made his layout on a blanket covered table, lighted only by two candles.

Never in all his tempestuous career did Ben Thompson work more coolly than he did that night.

He knew fairly well that if luck turned on him and the men broke his game, trouble would be averted; should Lady Luck, however, continue to smile on him —well, these players were of a stripe to take a hand in the run of luck.

Ben's phenomenal winning streak was soon made manifest. He began winning handily on almost every lay-out, dealing straight, playing straight.

At the end of an hour Ben had more than one-half the money in front of him, mostly in a canvas bag. Sweeping in his winnings, he shuffled the deck, passed it across the table for a cut.

Sergeant Miguel Zertuche took the deck for the cut and took the first rap at Ben's Lady Luck: The sergeant palmed a card in the cut and passed the deck back.

Ben was looking for such a move. But not a trace of emotion passed his countenance as he whispered slyly to Billy and Junus, "Get set!"

The players evidently expected him to call the turn then and there and they were prepared for him. A score of guns were leveled on the trio; a hand was ready to brush out the candles; other hands were ready to seize the money.

But Ben Thompson proceeded with the deal as though he had seen nothing.

Ben gave Sergeant Zertuche ample time to examine the card he had palmed and pass the word around. Ben knew that when one of the mates of the palmed card showed up in a layout, every soldier there would jump with a bet on the

other, thus forcing the dealer to take the suit thus handicapped.

Betting slackened off; the soldiers awaited the right showing. Ben continued to deal.

Finally, Ben made a layout of the four and seven, and every man in the room scrambled to make a bet on the four. Ben knew then that Zertuche had palmed a seven.

The men, off their guard in the excitement to bet on the cinch, paid little attention to this dumb dealer. They would break him. . . .

"The game's closed, boys!"

"You can't close this game now!" snarled Lieutenant Gonzales. Sergeant Zertuche whipped out his gun but Ben Thompson was already in action and killed the sergeant on the spot. A dozen men rushed the table and Ben's two companions were overpowered before they fired a shot. As Gonzales snuffed out the candles, Ben shot him dead and hell then broke loose.

Ben's plug hat was shot from his head and lost; the long, dudish tails on his coat were amputated by a swipe from a *machete;* but by one of the miracles for which there is no accounting, he escaped outside, as did his brother and Julius.

This short stay ended Ben Thompson's career in Laredo for the time being. He had arrived broke, ragged, penniless. He flourished amazingly for three days, had won, all told, $4,000 in gold and lost it; had bought a new outfit of clothes in which he had his picture taken. Now his clothes were slashed, ruined and gone; he was again penniless, and hunted industriously on both sides of the river by large bodies of mounted troops.

So he procured a wild mule one night while hiding out in a cemetery, mounted this capricious animal, and—after an all-night tussle—finally broke it to ride, and struck across the country for Corpus Christi and Houston.

He had hit the wild border when it was at its wildest, had literally set it afire, had made a name on both sides of the river that is still a tradition, and departed, all within two months. But that was the way of Ben Thompson.

(To be continued)

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THE ERUPTION AT TAMARACK

By James B. Hendryx

THE gold camp of Little Tamarack was agog—and it all started over a dog-fight—or at least, that's the way the sourdoughs explained it to Jase Quill, who sauntered into the Bon Ton Restaurant that evening from his claim, a couple of miles up the creek.

So it was that when he entered the door of the restaurant, old Bettles, dean of the sourdoughs, beckoned to him: "Fetch up a chair an' set in, Jase. Miss Lenna'll be in with the grub, d'reckly. Ain't it hell about the robbery?"

"What robbery?" Jase drew up a chair and joined the little group of sourdoughs.

"The only safe-robbery I ever heard tell of in the Yukon," replied the oldster, "an' I've be'n here sence the mountains was no bigger'n ant hills. Ain't you heard about Hank Weed's safe gittin' robbed, day before yisterday?"

Jase shook his head. "Nope. I ain't be'n off my claim for better'n a week. How come any one could rob Hank's safe? Hell, he keeps the Aurora Borealis open night an' day, most of the time —an' when it *is* closed he sleeps right over the saloon."

"It wasn't blow'd," explained Swiftwater Bill, a sourdough who had been elected constable. "It was robbed right in broad daylight. Yes, sir—an' Hank figgers that right around sixteen, eighteen hundred ounces was got away with. An' that figgers somewheres around twenty-five, thirty thousan' d o l l a r s! What do you know about that?"

"I don't know nothin' about it,"

grinned Jase. "It looks like you're the one to know. You're the constable. Me, I'm coroner—hell, you don't think a dead man done it, do you?"

"Well, by God, he'll be one as quick as we git holt of him!" exclaimed Old Bettles. "It ain't goin' to take a miners' meetin' no time at all to hang him so high the ravens can't find him! We're jist waitin' till Swiftwater gets holt of him."

Swiftwater Bill grinned ruefully: "I don't claim to be no detective, but I've put in two days an' two nights tryin' to locate the one that done it—an' I ain't had no luck."

"IT ALL started over a dog-fight," explained Moosehide Charlie. "We was settin' in a stud game, an' there was quite a few drinkin' at the bar, an' the front door was open, it bein' kind of warmish that day, an' that big lead dog of Camillo Bill's was layin' there beside Camillo's chair. I'd turned my cards down, that hand, an' I seen the hull thing. Couple of fellas come in, an' a hell of a big black-an'-white husky dog come in with 'em. Camillo's dog, he eyed this other one, an' then he kind of riz up an' stretched hisself an' walked over, kind of stiff-legged, to give him a smell. The other dog give a growl, an' so did Camillo's—an' the next thing, they was at it! They're both big dogs, an' the way they scattered them fellas at the bar was comical as hell. Couple of 'em fell down, an' the dogs fit right over the top of 'em, an' on out through the door. The fella that owned the husky give Camillo's dog a kick, an' Camillo dropped his cards an' ketched him one side of the head with a spittoon.

"What with the snarlin' an' growlin', other dogs come an' jumped on the fightin' ones, an' then some more. We all run out doors to watch it an' see that they wasn't gangin' up on Camillo's leader.

"More dogs come an' horned in, till it looked like all the dogs in the Yukon was in on it. The noise they made was somethin' turrible, an' all the *chechakos* an' the dancehall girls from the Caribou Saloon come pourin' out to see the fun. It was the damnedest dog-fight I ever seen—an' men was fightin' all around the edge of it, where one would kick at some one else's dog, er reach down to git his own dog by the tail to drag him out of it. A man would kick at a dog, an' some one else would paste him one. Even some of them dancehall girls got mixed up in it somehow—pullin' hair, an slappin' an' clawin' one another. I ain't had so much fun since Madam Mamie's house burnt at Forty Mile!"

"Which dog win?" asked the practical-minded Jase.

"Which dog! Cripes, there was fifty, sixty dogs into it!"

"I meant Camillo's, er the black-an'-white one—the ones that started the fracas?"

"They wasn't neither one of 'em cut up very bad—but they was both damn near smothered, what with all the dogs that piled onto 'em. After all the dogs got either licked er tuckered out, the fightin' quit, an' we come back to the game. Take it all in all, what with me playin' ahead in the game, an' such a hell of a dog-fight, I don't know when I'd had a nicer Sunday afternoon—till Hank up an' spoilt it all by claimin' his safe was robbed.

"We'd jest got the game goin' good agin, an' Bettles was dealin', an' I was settin' behind a pair of kings, back to back, an' no aces showin' agin me, an' the pot had been rose a few times—when Hank goes to the safe fer somethin' an' lets out a hell of a yell. He hollers that some one's be'n in the safe, an' there's a hell of lot of sacks missin' off'n the top of the pile. Well—we all had dust cached in there, so the game broke up right in the middle of that hand, which Bettles was settin' behind a pair

of tens, with another one in the hole—an' I'd of snagged me my third king on the last card—I run through the deck to see after the game busted up!

"We figger that some one snuck in whilst we was all out watchin' the dog-fight, an' grabbed up what sacks he could pack out of the safe, an' got away with 'em out the back door. Hank don't keep the safe locked whilst he's right there—an' him an' the bartender was both outside the door watchin' the fun."

"Yeah—an' whoever done it never left a damn thing to go by," volunteered Swiftwater Bill.

"Why, shore he wouldn't!" exclaimed Jase. "He'd be a damn fool to! It was prob'ly some sourdough, 'cause the *chechakos* mostly hangs out over to the Caribou."

"No sourdough would ever rob a safe!" defended Old Bettles. "Not even a cabin, er a cache was ever robbed till the damn *chechakos* come pourin' into the country! No sir—some *chechako* done it! An' it must of be'n a Christian one, at that."

"How do you figger that out?" questioned Swiftwater Bill. "It ain't no Christian act to rob a safe."

"It's like this," Bettles explained. "There was quite a few *chechakos* in camp that day. All of us sourdoughs, knowin' better how to go at sluicin', had got our dumps cleaned up, an' was kind of takin' it easy. That's why we was in camp. But damn few *chechakos* had cleaned up their dumps. Most of 'em was busy as hell—so the only ones that would be in camp in the daytime would be them that's too pious to work on Sunday. I've know'd some old sourdoughs which they was religious, thataway, an' they done the same thing—they'd come in Saturday night, an' git their drunk over with by Sunday night, so's not to lose no time. Yes sir, Swiftwater—you sift out all them pious *chechakos,* an' somewheres amongst 'em, you'll git yer man!"

"How in hell do I know if they're pious er not? Most all *chechakos* looks alike to me. I don't know what ones was in camp that day, an' which wasn't."

"You might go around amongst the claims an' sock 'em one," grinned Burr MacShane, "then the ones that swore at you would be above suspicion, an' all others wouldn't."

"Yeah," chuckled Swiftwater, "but a lot of 'em might sock back—an' there's a hell of a lot of big *chechakos.*"

"Well," growled Old Bettles, "what Little Tamarack needs is another damn good hangin'!"

"How about a game of stud?" suggested Moosehide. "That last one busted up right in the middle of my luck."

"The idee sounds reasonable," admitted Bettles. "How about it?"

"Not me," replied Swiftwater. "I ain't settin' in no games as long as there's a chanct of pickin' up that damn safe-robber."

"Go ahead an' start," said Jase, "an' I'll be over, soon as I've finished eatin'. I'm hungrier'n hell. I kin eat a hull nother order."

Old Bettles winked knowingly at the others: "Come on, then—we're losin' time. Jase, he'd eat till he busted to git the chanct to chew the fat with Miss Lenna."

"Yer crazy," retorted Jase, flushing. "That young woman's cantankerous as hell!"

WHEN the door closed behind the c h u c k l i n g sourdoughs, Swiftwater Bill edged his chair closer and leaned his elbows on the table.

"Fact is, Jase," he began, "you've got to help me out on this case. It's got me plumb stopped. Here it is Tuesday evenin' an' I ain't got nowheres."

"Who? Me? Hell, I ain't no more of a detective than you be," replied Jase, stuffing a huge forkful of moose meat into his mouth. "Take it, now, if it was a job of doctorin' er blacksmithin' I'd be right there. But I wouldn't be no good at detectin'."

"Sure you would," urged Swiftwater Bill. "Take that there murder case. If it hadn't be'n fer you, that damn cuss would of got away with it, an' we'd never know'd the difference."

"That wasn't nothin' but plain common sense," deprecated Jase, pouring a liberal portion of coffee into his saucer. "A man's s'posed to kind of use his head."

"I've used mine till it aches an' it ain't got me nowheres. Them sacks of dust was in the safe—an' then they wasn't there—an' that's as fer as I've got. Some one took 'em out."

Jase nodded agreement as he raised the saucer and noisily sucked its contents.

"How about Hank Weed hisself—er his bartender?" he asked. "They was closest to the safe when every one else run outside."

Swiftwater Bill shook his head: "No. I'd trust Hank Weed with everything I've got, an' so would all the boys. He's be'n in the country damn near as long as Bettles—an' so's Old Jake Dilgard. Hank's run saloons in Circle an' Eagle an' Dawson; he's handled, I expect, better'n a million in dust fer the boys. It's like Bettles said: this here is a *chechako* trick—er I never seen one. An' Hank an' Jake is both sourdoughs."

Jase pondered the problem as he dunked a biscuit in the thick gravy.

"Mebbe," he suggested, "you could kind of keep yer eyes open an' see if some *chechako* is spendin' more dust than ordinary."

"Hell, they all are!" exclaimed Swiftwater. "It's right in the middle of the clean-up, an' every one's sluicin' out their dumps while they've got plenty of water. Every one's spendin' more dust than common."

"Well, then," said Jase, "the only thing I see is to put it up to the Mounted. That's what they're paid fer."

"There ain't no police this side of Dawson." objected Swiftwater Bill.

"Well, us folks out on the cricks is entitled to protection, too. A policeman is s'posed to go where he's needed, ain't he? Er do they jest set around on their hams an' think?"

"The Mounted don't," grinned Swiftwater. "An', by Cripes, that's a damn good idee! I've got a notion to go down an' put this case up to Corporal Downey. The way the water is, I'd ort to make Dawson in twelve, fifteen days. An' we could git back in eighteen, twenty more, if we have good luck. There's a moon tonight, an' I believe I'll pull right out. Don't let no one but the sourdoughs know where I've gone—an' in the meantime, Jase, you keep yer eyes open."

"Oh, shore, I'll kind of look around. It prob'ly won't do no good, though. I couldn't tell that dust from any other dust."

"No, course not," agreed Swiftwater. "But you might hear some one talkin' er somethin'."

"'Tain't likely," said Jase. "It ain't nothin' any one would be boastin' about. Even a *chechako* wouldn't be damn fool enough to brag hisself into a hangin'."

"If the police comes up an' ketches him there won't be no hangin'," said Swiftwater. "They'll take him down to jail. Out along the cricks, where there ain't no jails, it's hangin' er nothin'."

"Yeah, I s'pose so," agreed Jase. "But it seems like hangin's a kind of stiff punishment fer stealin' a little dust."

"I've got a heap of faith in hangin's," replied Swiftwater Bill. "If you stick a thief in jail an' he turns out to be a brother-in-law to some politician, he gits turned out as quick as things quiets down a little; but onct you've got him hung, he could be brother-in-law to the King of England, an' it wouldn't do him no good."

"Yeah, hangin's got a more lastin' effect," Jase admitted, "an' where there ain't no jail handy, it's a nice way to learn a man not to steal. But, somehow, I can't take no pleasure in one. Mebbe, when I git more use' to the country, I'll like 'em better."

Swiftwater Bill rose from his chair.

"I'm pullin' out while the moon's up," he said, turning from the table. "So long—I'll be seein' you."

FIVE minutes later Miss Lenna entered from the kitchen. "What!" she exclaimed, "ain't you gone yet?"

"Nope. You ain't fetched me no pie. What kind you got?"

"Vinegar—same as always. Where do you think yer at, the Waldorf?" She placed a huge cut of pie before him, and glanced about the room. "Where's Swiftwater?" she asked. "An' what was you two gassin' about?"

"He wanted I should help him ketch that there thief that robbed Hank Weed's safe."

"How could you catch him?" sniffed the girl. "Sneak up an' lay an anvil on him—or maybe jest saw off his leg?"

"It was because he seen that I done a good job on that murder," replied Jase. "What you always pickin' on me fer? You know damn well that you, an' all the rest of 'em, would of let that murder go fer an accidental death."

"Sure, Jase, I know," smiled the girl. "You did a good job on that case. But—you told Old Bettles I was cantankerous. I heard you, from way out the kitchen."

"Well, you be. Yer smart as hell, an' you got a lot of good idees—but yer the damndest woman when it comes to augerin' I ever seen."

"Humph—if I hadn't held out against you, you'd have cut off that *chechako's* leg! I'll bet he's glad I'm cantankerous—he's got two good legs under him."

"Oh, shore, he would be. It was his leg—an' besides, he didn't have to do no augerin' about it. He jest laid back an' listened. I don't claim you wasn't right—that time. You was. An' you know'd right where Camillo Bill's appendix laid in amongst all them guts, too. That's jest what I was tellin' you—yer smart—an' if you'd only shut up an' not talk so much—"

"Yeah, an' let you go ahead an' cut off legs that never ought to come off! Listen here, Jase Quill—when I know I'm right, I'm goin' to talk—an' keep on talkin' till I win my point—an' don't you forget it!"

"A man couldn't," grinned Jase good-naturedly, "not with you runnin' off at the head like you do."

"You ain't told me yet how you expect to catch that thief."

"I don't expect to ketch him. It was Swiftwater expected me to. How would I know who done it? I wasn't even there to the dog-fight. I told Swiftwater the only way I know'd how to do it was to go down an' git the Mounted up here. So that's what he done."

"The Mounted! Do you mean that Swiftwater Bill has started for Dawson?"

"Shore—that's where the Mounted is. He said he was goin' to put the case up to Corporal Downey."

"An' you sit here an' let him go to Dawson without orderin' any supplies!" cried the girl.

"Supplies? I kin git all the supplies I need down to the tradin' post."

"Surgical supplies! An' medicines! There isn't a scrap of gauze dressin' in camp, an' no bichloride—not even a bottle of iodine! There's plenty of other things we ought to have, too."

"I don't go much on this here new-fangled stuff," replied Jase. "I guess that gauze is prob'ly all right, if you've got it—but that white cloth we git down to the tradin' post is all right, too. An' as fer them medicines you was talkin about, we don't need 'em. I've got better'n twenty kinds in my satchel—there's arniky, an' ippykak, an' blue mass, an akinite, an' quinine, calomel, an' parygorick, an' nux vomiky, an' chloryform, an' a chunk of opium, an' laudanum, an' tartar emetic, an' horse liniment, besides some medicine fer hog cholery that's claimed to work good on humans, too.

There's a few other kinds that I fergit, like this here atropia fer doctorin' hearts, an' the like of that. Cripes, we've got more medicine on hand than what diseases folks will git, the way it is. It would be foolish to fetch in more. Medicines costs money."

The girl shrugged disdainfully. "There's hardly a thing in that damn old bag that hadn't ought to be pitched in the crick, along with that old sheep-shearin' book of yours!"

"Sheep shearin' is only one of the things that book tells about. Most of it's about doctorin', an' it's a damn good book to have. An' them medicines, they've cured a damn sight more folks than what these here new-fangled ones has. Besides, my book wouldn't say nothin' about that new stuff—an' I wouldn't know what to do with it if I had it. There ain't enough money in doctorin' to lay in a lot of stuff you wouldn't have no use fer."

"There'd be more in it if you'd charge enough," snapped the girl. "Camillo Bill is the only one that paid anything like what his operation was worth. By the way, did that *chechako* with the broken leg pay you?"

"No, he ain't paid me nothin' yet. I'll tell you what I'll do. As quick as I git my dump cleaned up, I'll mosey up that feeder an' collect from him. I'll git yourn, too. I'll be through in ten days, er so. The reason I come down today is 'cause I run out of beans an' sugar. How much had we ort to charge him?"

"Well—we ought to split a couple of hundred dollars on it," said the girl.

"Couple hundred dollars! Cripes, that's awful high!"

The girl sniffed: "If a man's leg ain't worth two hundred dollars to him, what is it worth?"

"Well, I sort of figgered to charge him goin' wages—that's an ounce a day, an' we put in damn near a hull day. It would run right around fifteen, sixteen dollars fer the job. Course you put in a few more days nursin' him. You'd ort to git paid fer that."

"You strike him for two hundred, an' not a damn cent less," replied the girl. "They'll have more respect for you if you charge 'em more."

Jase grinned. "All right, Miss Lenna. I'll do like you say, but it kind of looks like highway robbery to me. They'll prob'ly figger I'm the one that robbed Hank Weed's safe—so if the boys start in to hang me, you've got to come out an' tell 'em the idee was yourn."

"I'll take the responsibility," laughed the girl. "An' you better run along now or Old Bettles'll kid the life out of you for hangin' around gassin' with me."

ONE morning, two weeks later, Jase Quill loaded his rifle and struck out into the hills for the two-fold purpose of acquiring some moose meat, and collecting his bill from the *chechako* whose leg had been saved after a very severe fracture.

It was late in the afternoon when he topped a high ridge, and paused to look down upon the camp of the two *chechakos* in the little valley of the feeder. Smoke rose from the stovepipe of the dirty, windowless shack, and the windlass still straddled the shallow shaft before the door. But the main dump—the dump that represented the winter's work of the two—had evidently not been sluiced.

"Huh," grunted Jase, "they're either lazier'n hell, er else that fella's leg's still bother'n him. Either way, he prob'ly won't pay me nothin'. Chances is, he'll be mad as hell when I tell him it's two hundred dollars. Mebbe I'll cut it down. I'll give Miss Lenna her hundred. She don't need to know how much I git."

Making his way down the steep hill, Jase knocked at the door of the shack, and the next minute was being welcomed into the room, heavy with the fumes of frying meat and kerosene from the smoking lantern. When his eyes had become

accustomed to the dim light of the smoky interior, he saw that both *chechakos* were unkempt and dirty.

Having had nothing to eat since daylight, he accepted their invitation to share the meal, and seated himself on the edge of a bunk.

"How's the leg comin'?" he asked.

"Fine—jest as good as ever it was," replied the injured man. "By the way, how much do I owe you? An' that nurse, too?"

"Well," replied Jase, hesitatingly, "you see, it was quite a job—what with the bones stickin' clean on out through yer pants—an' the haulin' you down to Burr's cabin, an' the nursin' an' all—the hull thing runs up to right around two hundred dollars."

"Cheap enough!" exclaimed the man. "I wouldn't of kicked if you'd said five hundred."

"Huh?" gulped Jase, staring at the man in surprise.

"Sure. Hell, if it hadn't be'n for you I'd prob'ly be dead by now. I know about them compound fractures, an' how they're apt to wind up with blood pizen. You done a swell job—an' you've earnt every cent of it. We're pullin' out fer Little Tamarack the first thing in the mornin', an' we'll swing around by your place an' pay you."

"That's fine," agreed Jase. "There ain't no hurry, in case mebbe you couldn't spare it, right now. I jest stopped in on a moose hunt."

"I kin pay it jest as well in the mornin' as any time," said the man. "Might's well git it squared up. We done pretty good this winter. We're goin' in fer supplies, in the mornin'."

The meal over, Jase took his departure, and as he proceeded slowly down the creek, he pondered. The men professed to have done well during the winter. But this statement did not jibe with the unsluiced dump, a quarter of a mile up the feeder. And Jase knew that the shallow shaft in front of the shack couldn't have yielded much dust, as it hardly had penetrated the top-soil.

"If they ain't sluiced out their dump, how kin he pay me them two hundred dollars?" he muttered. "An' if he could pay me in the mornin', why couldn't he jest as well of paid me now? They ain't goin' to git no dust out of that dump between now an' mornin'. But they're goin' to git it somewheres. It don't make sense. Like my old pa used to say: 'If a thing don't make sense, it needs watchin'.' Guess I'll jest drop back an' see."

CIRCLING to the rim, Jase climbed the ridge to a shoulder of rock that jutted out into the valley only a hundred yards or so below the cabin. It still lacked an hour of darkness when the two emerged from the shack and started to walk directly toward the man who was peering down at them from an elevation of perhaps a hundred feet.

The two halted at a point almost directly beneath him, deposited a spade and a small bundle on the ground and dropped to their knees at the base of the ridge. Leaning far out, Jase peered down and saw that one of the men was removing loose rock that evidently concealed the mouth of a cavity in the rock wall. When he had finished, the other reached into the aperture and proceeded to remove numerous little sacks, which he deposited in a pile between them.

Reaching for the small bundle, the other shook out a larger sack, and the two began immediately to transfer gold dust from the small sacks to this larger one. They worked in silence. At the end of a half hour the job was finished—the contents of twenty-four small sacks had been transferred to three larger ones, after which each drew a small sack from his pocket, filled it, and returned it to his pocket. The larger sacks were securely tied and returned to the cache, and the loose rock piled in place, whereupon the two gathered up the empty

sacks and, moving off a space, dug a hole and buried them, being careful to return the earth in such manner that no evidence of the excavation remained. They even went to the trouble of pushing over a rotten birch stub so that it fell directly across the spot where the sacks were buried.

When they returned to the shack, Jase Quill descended to the valley and struck out for Little Tamarack in the slowly gathering twilight.

IT WAS long after dark when he reached his cabin, and as he sat on the edge of the bunk and unlaced his pacs, he pondered, muttering to himself.

"Course, me bein' right there, they didn't want to go to their cache fer fear I might watch 'em. That's why he didn't want to pay till tomorrow. But—they ain't sluiced out no dump. Where in hell would they git all that dust they had cached? There was twenty-four sacks of it, an' it would run right around eighty ounces to the sack. Why would they be changin' it into them big sacks? An' why would they go to work an' bury them empty sacks—an' be so damn careful to cover up the place where they buried 'em? It don't make sense. If Swiftwater Bill was over to his cabin I'd go an' tell him about it. Mebbe he could figger it out. But, he's gone down to Dawson about that safe robbery."

Jase paused suddenly and a hobbed pac struck the floor with a thud as he sat staring at the opposite wall.

"By God!" he muttered, "I wonder if it could be that them sacks was the ones that was stole out of Hank's safe?" Crossing to a shelf, he procured the stub of a pencil and, lacking paper, reached into his battered black bag and drew forth his sole medical work, a well-thumbed *tome* entitled "The Family Physician and Household Remedies for Man and Beast, to Which Is Appended a Hundred Good Recipes for the Housewife," which he carried to the table and proceeded laboriously to figure on in its inside cover.

"Twenty-four times eighty runs up to nineteen hundred an' twenty ounces—if this pencil's any good—an' Swiftwater Bill claimed there was sixteen, eighteen hundred ounces stole. Looks like Hank lost more dust than he let on—er mebbe them sacks didn't run quite eighty ounces apiece—I didn't git no chanct to heft 'em. Well—who would think that them *chechakos* would pull a trick like that! But then agin—they're dirty as hell—an' I s'pose a dirty man would do anything. By Cripes—when they show up in the mornin' I'll jest nab 'em! I'll learn 'em they can't rob no camp where I'm at! Then, when Swiftwater comes back with this here Corporal Downey, I'll jest turn 'em over to him. The Mounted's all right—but they ain't apt to be where stuff is stole, an' it takes too long to fetch 'em. Take Little Tamarack, now—an' we don't have to worry none about doctorin' an' detectin' as long as I stay on crick. Course," he amended, "some folks would prob'ly die in spite of how good they was doctored; an' some thief might git away—like if I didn't happen along."

Blowing out his light, Jase lay down on the bunk and drew his blankets over him, but sleep would not come. A problem confronted him, and he pondered aloud:

"How in hell 'm I goin' to keep them two till Swiftwater gits back? He ain't hardly got to Dawson, yet—an' it'll be clost to three weeks before he's back, even if he has good luck. What'll happen—jest as soon as the boys finds out I've ketched them robbers, they'll call a miners' meetin' an' hang 'em on me. I can't git use' to hangin' a man fer stealin'. Murderin' is different. But it's kind of rough on a man to hang him jest fer stealin' some dust. Cripes, they up an' hang him now—he ain't goin' to git no two hundred dollars' worth of good out of that leg! I might give him a cut rate,

but he'd want to know why—an' if I told him it was because he was goin' to git hung so quick, he'd prob'ly raise hell about that—him an' his pardner, too—an' then I'd have to shoot 'em, er somethin'. I don't hardly feel right about it." After an hour's restless tossing Jase suddenly exclaimed aloud: "By Cripes—I've got it! I won't let on to them, nor no one else, that I know who stole the dust! They'll go back to their claim; then when Swiftwater comes back with the Mounted, I'll tell him where he kin git holt of the thieves, an' the dust—an' them empty sacks, too. Them empty sacks is what'll convict 'em. The boys can't identify their dust—but they'll all know their own sacks."

HIS problem solved, Jase settled into a profound slumber from which he awakened, hours later, by a pounding on his door. Rising, sleepily, he opened it to admit the two *chechakos*, one of whom advanced to the table on which he tossed a well-filled pouch.

"There you be," he said. "Weigh out yer two hundred."

"I ain't got no scales," replied Jase, eyeing the sack.

"Two hundred dollars figgers out twelve an' a half ounces," said the *chechako*. "Take a guess at it—an' if you git thirteen, fourteen ounces, it's all right with me. What's a couple of ounces, one way er another, when you've got a good leg under you?"

"Yeah," replied Jase, "but—you ain't got much use out of it, an'—" He paused abruptly, and the other grinned:

"I ain't yet. But I will. That leg's as good as ever, an' I'm goin' to git plenty use out of it. Fact is, we're pullin' out tomorrow. We come down today to lay in our supplies."

"Pullin' out!" exclaimed Jase. "Where to? I thought you said you done pretty good on yer claim."

The other *chechako* hastened to reply: "Oh, shore—we done pretty good—but not good enough to suit us. We figger, mebbe, we kin do better on some other crick. Fact is, we want somethin' big—want to locate some crick where you kin scoop it right out of the grass roots—like they tell about on Bonanza when they first hit it."

"There ain't many of them cricks," opined Jase.

"Shore there ain't, but there might be some—an' we might be the lucky ones to find one. A man can't never tell what he'll run on to. But don't say nothin' about us pullin' out. It ain't no one's business—an' we don't want no stampede on our tail."

"I won't say nothin'," promised Jase. "It ain't none of my business. Wait till I make a fire, an' we'll have breakfast."

"We et before we started," said Jase's former patient.

Jase shook his head: "Nope—I wouldn't want no more than was comin' to me—an' I wouldn't want no less. You boys go on to the camp, an' I'll come on as soon as I've et. We kin weigh out the right amount on Hank Weed's scales—er else over to the tradin' post. You'll be in Little Tamarack anyway till noon, won't you?"

"Oh, shore. We want to lay in quite a lot of grub—an' then we'll prob'ly have a little drinkin' to do. It'll be a long time till we see another saloon. We won't be headin' back fer the claim much before night. Hurry down an' we'll buy you a drink."

Over his breakfast Jase reconsidered his problem: "So that's why they was changin' them sacks—so if they was ketched up with, they wouldn't have nothin' on 'em. What in hell will I do, now? If I shut up they'll git away. If I don't shut up; they'll git hung. If there was only some way of holdin' 'em till the police gits here!"

As Jase pondered ways and means, his eyes rested on his old black bag and suddenly a slow grin spread the lips behind

the thick chestnut beard, and his huge fist banged the table with a mighty thud.

"By Cripes—I'll bet it'll work!" he exclaimed. Hastily washing and drying his dishes, he fumbled in the bag, selected a certain bottle, pulled on his cap and headed down the creek for Little Tamarack.

AN HOUR later he located the two *chechakos* in the Caribou Saloon, where they were engaged in acquiring a pleasant edge. They greeted him vociferously, and as they invited him to join them one explained at length to the bartender that Jase was the man who had saved his partner's leg.

Tossing his sack on the bar, the other ordered the bartender to weigh out twelve and a half ounces of dust, neither noticing that as Jase filled his glass from the bottle before him he deftly slipped in a few drops of liquid from a small vial he had concealed in the palm of his hand. Nor did either notice that the big man deftly switched glasses while they were engrossed in watching the bartender weigh out the dust.

The gold having been paid over, they all drank, after which Jase bought a round, and then the other *chechako*. The house followed with another round, during the course of which Jase managed to repeat the doctoring and switching operation, and the three separated, the two *chechakos* going to the trading post while Jase strolled over to the Aurora Borealis Saloon, the hang-out of the sourdoughs.

"I don't rec'lect how much is a dose," he muttered, as he watched the two disappear through the doorway to the trading post, "so I give him another to make shore. If that don't fetch him, I'll keep repeatin' it till it does. The way they're feelin' now, it ain't goin' to be hard to persuade 'em to have another drink."

Few sourdoughs were in camp, and after an hour's desultory conversation the door opened and the partner of the *chechako* who had injured his leg entered the room and approached Jase who stood leaning against the bar.

"Say," he began, "I feel kind of sick."

"Sick?" asked Jase, in surprise. "You didn't act very sick a while back when we was over to the Caribou, nor neither when you was up to my cabin."

"No, an' I wasn't sick then, neither. It's come on in the last half hour. Seems like it's gittin' worst an' worst. I feel like hell. Ain't you got no medicine you could give me?"

"Oh, shore," replied Jase, with an air of the utmost confidence. "You ain't got nothin' to worry about if sickness is all that ails you. I kin doctor you up, all right. Where 'bouts is this sickness at?"

"I guess it's mostly my stummick—but I feel like hell all over. I went out behind the tradin' post an' throw'd up—but it didn't seem to do much good, so I come over here to see you."

"You done right," agreed Jase, eyeing the man critically. "You do look kind of sickish, at that. It's probably somethin' you et—but then agin, it might be yer comin' down with some disease. You've got a kind of a bluish look, an' yer pale as hell."

"I feel kind of tired an' done up, like—an' every now an' then I git a hell of a bellyache. You don't think it could be that there appendeetus—like Camillo Bill had?"

"Oh, shore, it could be," said Jase, feeling the man's pulse. "But it might be a lot of other things, too. I ain't goin' to cut into yer guts till I have to. I always claim it's best to wait till yer shore. You ain't hardly got no pulse at all. It might be yer heart—but the chances is it's yer stummick—er mebbe yer liver, er some part like that. You ain't in no shape to go clean back out to yer shack, an' I ain't got my satchel along with my medicines in it, an' you ain't got no place to stay here in camp. You better tell yer pardner to go ahead an' order them sup-

plies, an' me an' you'll go on up to my place, where I kin doctor you right. He kin come on up later. I kin put the two of you up, an' you'll be where I kin keep an eye on you. You look to me like a pretty sick man—what with them cramps an' all, an' the kind of a blue look you've got. But I kin prob'ly fix you up—I've doctored lots of sick folks—horses, too—an' part of them got well. Anyway, if you don't, the boys'll see that you git a good funeral. We could lay you right along side of that fella we hung fer murder. I was jest thinkin' the other day we'd ort to have more folks in our graveyard—it looks lonesome as hell, with only the one slab."

"But—hell!" cried the man, "I don't want to be buried!"

"We wouldn't want to leave you layin' around if you was dead," said Jase. "But you might pull through, at that."

"Ow!" cried the man, "there's that damn cramp startin' agin!"

"Go set in one of them chairs," said Jase, "an I'll go tell yer pardner—then we'd better be gittin' up to my cabin, so I kin git to work on you."

THE trip to the cabin took fully two hours, with Jase all but carrying the man who, besides suffering from an extreme lassitude, was subject to recurring cramps and spasmodic paroxysms of nausea.

The patient was put to bed in Jase's bunk and given a dose of laudanum. When his partner showed up, late in the afternoon, the man was sleeping, his respiration weak and irregular.

"He sure looks sick," opined the newcomer, gazing down at the man in the bunk. "I wonder what ails him?"

"Well, it could be lots of things," replied Jase, with professional reserve. "That's what I've got to find out. You better lay over here tonight. Chances is I'll know by mornin'."

"Might's well stay here as any place," said the man. "There ain't nothin' to hinder us takin' a little drink, is there?"

He produced a bottle, and when the drinks were poured Jase indicated the water bucket.

"Step down to the crick an' fetch up a pail of water," he ordered. "It's time to give him a dose of medicine, an' I kin be doin' that while yer gone."

The man readily complied, and as he stepped out the door, Jase once again brought the little vial into play. When he returned with the water, both drank, and the big man proceeded to prepare supper, slanting the other an occasional glance out of the tail of his eye. The man became less and less voluble until, just as the meal was being transferred from stove to table, he bolted from the room, to return a few minutes later, white and shaken.

"Supper's ready," said Jase, adding the gravy to a huge plate of moose meat.

"Cripes! I can't eat no supper!" replied the man. "I'm sick as hell. I'm took jest like he was. An'—ow—God—I'm gittin' a cramp!"

"H-u-m," said Jase, eyeing the other with professional interest. "You do look kind of whitish, er bluish like—same as him. Chances is you've both got the same disease. It must be ketchin'. Git yer clo's off an' crawl in the bunk there, side of him. I hope you ain't set the hull camp up with it."

"What could it be?" asked the man, as he sank on a bench and began to remove his pacs.

"It could be a lot of things. Chances is, from what symptoms you've got, it's smallpox. If it is, you'll begin to break out about day after tomorrow—then I'll know. In the meantime, you've both got to lay there in the bunk an' wait. I kin keep you dosed up with laudanum so the pain won't be so bad. I never doctored no smallpox yet—it'll be good practice fer me. After supper I'll git out my book an' read up about it."

"Did you find out about it?" queried

the man, weakly, as Jase returned his book to the bag.

"Oh, shore. The smallpox ain't nothin' to worry about. Why, some common diseases the book takes damn near a hull page to tell what to do fer 'em. But the smallpox—all it says—'when smallpox is suspected, isolate the patient immediately, and call a doctor.' But, I'm here already—so we don't even need to do that."

"What's isolate?"

"Isolate? Don't you know what isolate is? Well—isolate—that there's the medical way of sayin' to keep him cool. You see, you boys has got quite a fever, an' it'll git worst tomorrow, an' then I'll begin to isolate you. We ain't got no ice—but I'll keep a rag wet with cold water on yer head an' yer chest, an' that'll work jest as good as ice. You don't need to worry none, with a doctor right here in the house. Yer lucky."

"I don't feel hot—like a fever," ventured the man.

"That's jest it," replied Jase. "You prob'ly won't, neither. That's where the danger lays with smallpox. You've got a fever, all right—but you don't know it—it's an internal fever. Yer liver an' lungs an' all them other guts is burnin' up with fever—an' the patient never knows it. Go on to sleep now, an' I'll start in isolatin' you in the mornin'."

All during the following day Jase ministered to his two patients, dosing them with medicine, and at intervals, laying saturated cloths on their faces, wrists and chests. The following morning he examined them and pointed delightedly to an eruption of small vesicular papulae that felt hard and shot-like to the touch.

"But—kin you cure it?" quavered one of the patients, staring in horror at the papulae that covered his partner's face.

"That's what's goin' to be interestin' to see," cried Jase enthusiastically. "Like I said, I ain't never doctored no smallpox, an' that's a p'int in our favor. A new broom sweeps clean—like the Good Book says. It ain't like I'd doctored a lot of cases of it an' was all wore out an' jaded. Don't you boys worry fer a minute. I'll do my damndest, an' it's bound to come out—one way er another."

Toward noon a prospector from farther up the creek stopped for a moment but Jase waved him away.

"Don't come in!" he warned. "We've got the smallpox in here. Look through the winder, there, an' you kin see how they're all broke out."

The man looked and was instantly convinced.

"Gawd, Doc," the man cried in horror, "what you goin' to do about it?"

"Do about it! I'm goin' to cure 'em, of course. What the hell would I do?"

"I'm goin' down to camp, an' jest stopped in to see if there was somethin' you needed."

"You might fetch up some sugar and tea an' a sack of flour. There'll be three of us eatin' here fer a spell. An' go to the store an' git some of thát there white cloth—Miss Lenna kin tell you the kind. I've got to keep on isolatin' these men an' I'm about out of rags."

NEWS of the appearance of smallpox spread like wildfire through Little Tamarack. Some three hours after the visitor had departed a loud hail called Jase to the door. There, at a respectful distance stood the prospector who had conveyed the news, together with Lenna Kinkaid and a delegation of sourdoughs.

"Here's yer stuff," called the man, swinging a pack to the ground. "You kin come out an' git it when we're gone."

"How do you know that's smallpox, Jase?" demanded the girl.

"'Cause it couldn't be nothin' else—sick as they be—an' all broke out."

"I've got to see 'em."

"You'll have to look through the winder, then," replied Jase. "You can't come no closter'n that to 'em—an' you waitin' on table in the restaurant. You

might set the hull camp up with it. Did they doctor smallpox in them hospitals where you worked at?"

"Of course they did. Personally, I never had a case—but I know the symptoms and the treatment. How's their temperature?"

"Their fever's runnin' good an' high. I've be'n isolatin' 'em."

"How long were they sick before the eruptions showed?"

"It was the third day."

"That would be right—the third or fourth day," admitted the nurse.

"'Course it's right! Hell, them diseases knows when to break out without you tellin' 'em!"

"Smallpox was bad in Circle, one time," said Moosehide Charlie. "A lot of folks died—mostly Siwashes."

"I want you to take this thermometer and get their temperatures," said the girl, advancing a few steps and extending the instrument.

"It wouldn't do no good," replied Jase. "If I go stickin' that thing in their mouth, then the next one we used it on would git it. I kin tell a fever when I feel 'em."

"You do as I say," insisted the girl. "We can sterilize the thermometer. And I want to look at the patients, too." She turned to the sourdoughs. "Come on—those of you who have seen the smallpox. We'll look through the window while Jase takes their temperatures. I want to be sure it's smallpox."

Advancing, she handed Jase the thermometer; then, accompanied by Moosehide Charlie, Old Bettles, and Camillo Bill, she passed around to the window, where all four peered at the patients.

"It's smallpox, all right," agreed the sourdoughs. After a careful scrutiny the girl concurred.

"What's the temperature?" she asked.

Jase scrutinized the instrument he had withdrawn from the mouth of one of the patients.

"It's somewheres betwixt a hundred an' three an' a hundred an' four," he replied.

"Shake it good and hard and take the other."

"He's jest about the same," replied Jase. "I'll keep the thermometer here. If you was to handle it you might ketch the disease."

"Sure, you keep it," agreed the girl. "An' now listen carefully. There isn't much you can do in the way of medicine. An opiate, to relieve intense pain—"

"I've already give 'em laudanum," replied Jase.

"That's all right. The rest is a matter of care. They must have light, nourishing food. I brought a couple of quarts of broth. Feed it to them at intervals. Give them cold water to drink—all they want, and keep cool compresses on their bodies. That's about all you can do."

"That's what I be'n doin'," replied Jase. "Them hospital doctors ain't got nothin' on me."

"I'll come up ever' day, an' see how you're gettin' on, Jase," said the girl. "I'll make the broth, an' bring it along. But—Jase—How about you? You're almost sure to catch it. And—what will we do, then?"

"Listen, Miss Lenna—don't you go worryin' about me. I ain't afraid of no smallpox. Hell—you don't never hear of doctors ketchin' them things—er else there wouldn't be no doctors—they mix right up in them diseases all the time—they've got to . . . it's their business. If it'll make you feel any easier—I'll jest bet any one ten ounces agin an ounce that I don't git it!"

The party returned to camp, and as Jase re-entered the cabin with the supplies they left, he grinned to himself, and winked at the little thermometer that lay on the shelf beside the clock.

A WEEK passed, during which the girl never missed a day in visiting Jase's cabin. Each day she brought fresh broth, and each day she viewed the patients

through the window, noting that the papulae changed from vasicular to typical pustular form. Also she scrutinized Jase for some sign that he had contracted the dread disease, but each day found him cheerful and apparently as well as ever.

"You're over the grade, now, Jase," she told him, on the ninth day, as they talked together at some distance from the cabin. "Those pustules should begin to dry up now. I brought up some oil for you to put on their skin to relieve the itching. Put it on good and thick —but don't rub it in. You've be'n just wonderful, Jase—an' a lot smarter than I thought you were—to diagnose that as smallpox before any eruption took place. If it hadn't be'n for you, we'd have had a terrible epidemic. The boys are all talkin' about it. You're a hero —to stay up here alone and see them through. No one will ever forget it."

"Yeah," grinned Jase, "I shore as hell saved their lives. But hell, Miss Lenna, that ain't nothin'. That's what a doctor is s'posed to do."

"By the way, Jase—there's goin' to be a miners' meetin' this afternoon. They caught the fellow who robbed the Aurora Borealis safe, an' they're goin' to hang him. They say the meetin' will just be a matter of routine. They claim they've got the goods on him. He denies it, of course, but the boys say they've got a good case of circumstantial evidence against him, an' he hasn't got a chance. He can't remember where he was the day of the robbery. It's too bad—he's a tough-lookin' young fellow, an' he oughtn't to have robbed the safe of course—but—I wish they wouldn't hang him."

Jase listened with widening eyes. "Hang some one!" he cried, "fer robbin' that safe! Is Swiftwater Bill back with the police?"

"No. If he was they wouldn't be hangin' him. The police would take him to Dawson."

"They ain't goin' to hang him, nohow!" cried Jase. "They've got the wrong man! By God, if I hurry I kin git down there in time to stop 'em!"

Rushing to the cabin, the man returned a moment later with his cap, and closing the door behind him, headed down the creek at a run.

"Wait!" screamed the girl. "Jase Quill, you stay here!"

"I can't wait," he replied, pausing for an instant. "They'll hang the wrong man! I gotta go, an' go like hell, er I might be too late!"

"You stay right here! You'll spread smallpox all over the whole camp! You can't go! It would be murder!"

"It'll be murder if I don't go! By God, I'll scatter that meetin'!" and without another word, he dashed away in the direction of Little Tamarack, leaving the girl wringing her hands in helpless fury.

THE miners' meeting that convened that afternoon in the Aurora Borealis Saloon made short shrift of the defendant, a hard-visaged youth who emphatically denied any knowledge of the crime. But the evidence had piled up against him. He was spending more dust than he should have been spending for the depth of his shaft. He explained this by stating that he had struck a small, rich pocket. Also he explained that it was this pocket to which he had referred on certain occasions when he had boasted that he hadn't worked very hard for his. He could not remember being in camp on that particular Sunday, and when numerous citizens swore to have seen him there, he lamely confessed that he must have been too drunk that day to remember where he was. Altogether, he made a most miserable witness for himself.

The ballot had gone unanimously against him, and he was standing, white and shaking with terror, waiting for Old Bettles, as Mayor of Little Tamarack,

to sentence him to be hanged—when into the room burst a madman! Puffing and panting, Jase Quill barged into the thick crowd, shoving men right and left, throwing them out of his way. Someone recognized him, and the cry of "Smallpox" went up, to be echoed by a hundred throats, as men fought frantically and fell over each other to reach the doors. In three minutes the room was emptied of all save Old Bettles, the prisoner, and Hank Weed, who stood behind the bar waving his bung-starter.

"Git to hell out of here!" he cried. "I'll brain you! What the hell do you want to do—give us smallpox? Git—er I'll let you have this bung-starter right side of the head! This here's a saloon—not no pest-house!"

Jase paused in the middle of the floor and grinned:

"Jest keep yer shirt on, Hank," he said. "The main danger's past, up to my cabin—an' if you don't come no closter'n what you be, yer all right. What I come down fer is to keep you fellas from makin' damn fools of yerselves by hangin' this here party. He didn't have no more to do with robbin' yer safe than I did."

"How do you know?" demanded Old Bettles.

"'Cause I know who done it," retorted Jase, "an' what's more, I kin prove it! An' that's a damn sight more'n you've done. 'Cause you can't prove nothin' that ain't so!"

"The evidence agin' him is damn convincin'," said Bettles.

"I don't care how convincin' it is—he never done it!"

"Who did?" Old Bettles' words rang like a pistol shot in the ears of the three men in the room, and those of the men who crowded the doors, not daring to re-enter.

"Them *chechakos* up to my shack done it—that's who!"

"You mean—them ones that's got the smallpox?" cried Bettles.

"Them's the ones—an' no one else."

"How do you know? You claimed you could prove it."

"They talked in their sleep when they was delirious with fever," replied Jase.

"Hell's fire!" cried Old Bettles, "that ain't no proof! A man might say anythin' when he was out of his head. Yer a damn fool, Jase!"

"Mebbe," grinned Jase, "an' mebbe a man might say anythin' when he was out of his head—but, by God, he couldn't have the dust that was stole—an' the sacks it was stole in, onlest he stole 'em, could he?"

"You mean—they've got that dust—an' them sacks?"

"They shore have—at least, that's what they claim. Listen—it's like this: I heard 'em talkin' in their sleep, an' they told right where their cache was, an' how they'd changed the dust into three other sacks an' buried the ones it was stole in case they know'd them sacks could be identified, an' where they'd buried the empty sacks, an' how they was in camp to buy supplies fer to pull out on when they was took sick.

"All you got to do is to hold off hangin' this party till you kin send some of the boys up to their claim an' see if they're tellin' the truth. It won't take long. It's only six mile—an' if they hurry they kin git back tonight. I kin describe the cache, an' the place where them sacks is buried so the boys can't miss 'em—if they're there. If they ain't there, then you kin go on with this hangin'. That's fair enough, ain't it?"

"Shore it is," agreed Bettles. "God knows, we don't want to hang the wrong party. But, even at that, I believe yer settin' too much store by what them sick men was mutterin' about. I don't think we'll find a damn thing."

"All right," replied Jase, "come on back an' hang this pore devil, then. But you've got to give him that much of a break."

"We'll shore do it, Jase—an' thanks

fer the tip. An' now, fer God's sake, git to hell out of here, 'fore we all git the smallpox! Mebbe if we take drinks enough to kind of steeralize our mouths an' guts, we won't git it. We'll let you know what we find."

LATE that night Jase was summoned to his door by a loud hail. Picking up his lantern, he stepped outside, to be confronted by a throng of lantern-bearing men standing at a respectful distance. He advanced toward them till they began backing away.

"That's clost enough, Jase," called Bettles. "You was right about them *chechakos*. We got back all the dust an' all the sacks—right where you said they'd be. We're shore obliged to you, Jase. An' that there prisoner we was goin' to hang—he's tickled as hell. How long before them damn cusses in there will be ready to hang?"

"Come on an' hang 'em now, if you want to," grinned Jase. "I can't stop you."

"But—Cripes! We'd all ketch the smallpox!"

"Well, of course," admitted Jase, "there's that angle, too."

"When will they be well enough so we wouldn't ketch it?"

"Oh—a week—ten days—two weeks. Whenever you feel like tacklin' the job."

"We'll post guards so they can't sneak away when they git well enough," said Bettles. "They've got to be learnt that they can't pull no stuff like that on Little Tamarack."

"Oh, shore," agreed Jase. "Post yer guards. I don't want they should git away no more than you do."

"What's all the row, here?" demanded a voice, as young Corporal Downey, of the Mounted Police, closely followed by Swiftwater Bill, stepped into the lantern light.

"Hello, Downey!" cried Old Bettles, "By God, yer jest the man we wanted to see! We've got a job fer you. Jase Quill has located them safe robbers. But we didn't expect you fer a couple of weeks."

"I run onto him at the mouth of the Stewart, an' he come on back with me," explained Swiftwater. "It saved quite a bit of time. We was aimin' to fetch camp tonight, when we seen all the lights."

"Where's the robbers?" asked the officer.

"In Jase's cabin. But you can't do nothin' about it till they git well."

"What's the matter? Did Jase shoot 'em?"

"No. They've got the smallpox. We aimed to hang 'em when they got well, if you hadn't got here by then."

"Smallpox!" exclaimed Corporal Downey. "Yer crazy. There ain't no smallpox in the country. Let's have a look at 'em."

Lenna Kinkaid stepped from the crowd and barred the young officer's way: "Don't go in there!" she cried. "They have got smallpox. I'm a nurse—an' I know."

"Yeah," grinned Jase Quill, "an' I'm a doctor—an' I know a damn sight better. Go on right in, Corp'ral an' help yerself to 'em. There ain't nothin' in there that'll hurt you. I was jest stallin' along with this smallpox stuff till you come, 'cause I can't git use' to hangin' a man fer stealin'. I worked like hell to save their lives."

"What do you mean—save their lives, if they ain't got the smallpox?" demanded Bettles.

"Save 'em from gittin' hung, of course. Hell—I give 'em all the smallpox they've got, right out of my satchel!"

The girl stepped forward, her eyes fixing Jase's: "What do you mean—gave 'em the smallpox? Jase Quill, you know they're all broken out!"

"Oh, shore—I broke 'em out. It wouldn't of looked like the smallpox, if I hadn't. I 'tended to that—an' their sickness, too."

"How about their temperatures?" demanded the girl. "You couldn't give them a fever."

"They never had none, neither. I lied about the fever. Cripes. I'd lie like hell to save a man's life! Lots of times doctors has to."

"I don't believe it, yet," insisted the girl, stubbornly. "How could you fake a case like that—with the eruptions an' all?"

"Huh, any one that really onderstands medicine could do that," replied Jase, slanting her a superior glance. "Tartar emetic—that's the answer! Give it to 'em inside, an' it makes 'em sicker'n hell. Put it on the outside, an' it makes 'em break out. My old pa used tartar emetic fer a blister—an' I jest happened to rec'lect he always use' to say how them blisters looked jest like the smallpox. That's what I had them rags soaked in that I was isolatin' 'em with. Hell—a good doctor's got to use his head! Them new-fangled ones down to the hospitals wouldn't know what tartar emetic was. Chances is, they'd of let them men git hung!"

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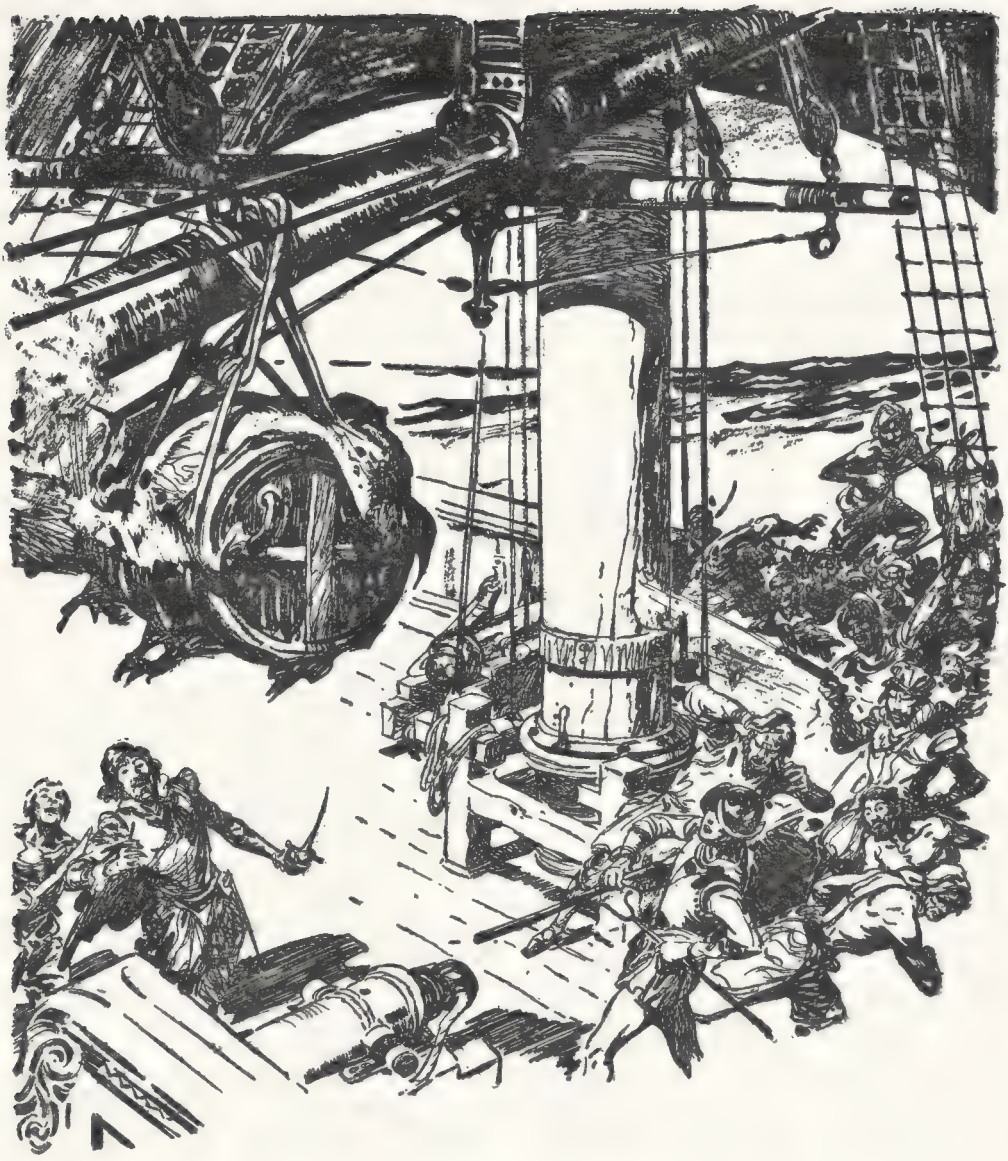
PART III

HUROC THE AVENGER

(the story so far)

EVEN at the moment that his war galleys were sailing into Tripoli, heavily laden with loot and valuable prisoners, the corsair who called himself Sidi Hamet was worried, and for good reason.

The Sultan, jealous of his wealth and masking avarice under a great show of friendship, had demanded his daughter's hand in marriage. The very idea was a death-blow to Hamet's ambitions. Once in the power of the Turk, he would be his own man no longer. And, being himself English and loving his daughter, he took the only way out, by going for aid, not to powerful and treacherous colleagues, but to the only Englishman he



by Gordon Young

could find, a rebellious galley slave, one of his own captives.

A few days after the Sultan's demand, they took Mariuma, Sidi's daughter, to her grave, amid great wailing and mourning. At least, that was what every one thought. In reality, the girl was spirited away in a boy's garb, with the galley slave, who called himself Mister Herrack, at her side. Escaping undetected, they boarded a grain ship bound for Genoa, where the wily Hamet had a ship waiting for the fleeing pair.

No sooner were they out of the Straits of Gibraltar than pirates dogged their trail. Herrack saw that his path to freedom was blocked by the *Maddalena*, captained by Ripaudi, a jackal of the Piombo family of merchant princes. After a brief encounter, Ripaudi's men boarded and scuttled the smaller ship, and Herrack and Mariuma were taken

prisoner, after a desperate struggle.

Mariuma saved her companion's life by convincing Ripaudi that her father would pay heavy ransom, and Herrack, because of his obvious mastery of sea-wisdom, was made boatswain's mate.

He soon had opportunity to show his captors that their appointment had not been unwise. For, threatening a sudden end to the power of the Piombos and the lives of all on board, mutiny suddenly flared on the ship.

CHAPTER IX (*continued*)

THE deck was crowded with a hive-like swarming and every tongue a-buzz. Not all had been in the mutineers' plot, but all were willing to be in it if it succeeded.

The master's mate, who had the watch, came to the break of the quarterdeck with jumps that spread his cloak like wings. He turned back. Two men were at the wheel. He clapped a hand to the neck of one and sent him roaring "Mutiny!" through the indoor passages, then bade the other on pain of death to hold fast to the helm.

Black Pietro came out with lumbering stride and drawn two-handed sword. He made for the larboard ladder and met men who had turned aside from Herrack's cutlass.

Ripaudi and squat Carlos came out together.

Ripaudi held a drawn sword and was as naked as a fish under the silk robe thrown about his shoulders. The robe, wind-whipped, swung in bellying flurries, showing the white nakedness.

One look and Ripaudi yelled, "To him!" He pointed downward to where Herrack fended, hacked, slashed. His blows in the air were as fast as a drummer's sticks when he beats an alarm.

Carlos turned aside with ax in a gleaming whirl to take his place beside his good friend Pietro.

Ripaudi stripped the robe from his shoulders, swirled it into a bundle-like wrapping about his left forearm, rushed headlong down the starboard ladder.

It was a thick fight. Ripaudi's fierce skill mocked clumsy men. The glittering sword's point stabbed throats and faces with dazzling rapidity.

When Herrack struck, a man carried a wide gash bone-deep and the bone was often splintered; when Ripaudi struck a man was stabbed. The blade flashed to right, to left, at throats, at cheeks, at eyes. He caught blows on the silken-wrapped arm, and sweat ran down his daintily white body.

Falconets belched flame-flashes from the bulkhead partition under the quarterdeck, where the gunner, an old hand at taming mutineers, had hastily blank-charged and fired two *murderers* set there to rake the waist if a crew tried mutiny. There were no missiles in the guns' throats, but the corn-grained powder pierced clothing and burnt hides. The fire-flashing roar and bellying smoke gave warning how deadly the discharge would be from shotted guns.

That, like a magic word in a loud voice, ended the outbreak.

To see and hear the hive-like swarming over the deck, the changed yelp in men's throats, it would appear not more than a dozen mutineers had been making all the uproar. Shipmates in sudden honest rage seized them.

Chamlette was caught by many hands, cursed, struck, and pushed forward before the other prisoners by men who wanted to appear loyal. Voices in wild fury shouted for summary punishment of the mutineers. Arms waved. The call was for torture. There were huzzahs and bellowed praise for Ripaudi.

Ripaudi breathed with bearded mouth open, panting; but his mouth smiled. He was not deceived in the least; yet would punish some few as if they were all that needed punishment. He coolly shook open the slashed robe, swung it about

his shoulders, and stepped back to raise himself on the ladder and so overlook the crowd.

Boatswain Locke stirred dizzily. Blood ran from his mouth. He groped at the back of his head. Herrack helped him to rise.

The boatswain staggered, spat blood. His eyes lingered in downward slant at his own cutlass with blade adrip in Herrack's hand. His bloodshot eyes lifted to Herrack's face.

Boatswain Locke said not a word but rubbed blood from his mouth on his forearm, looked aloft, sucked in a deep breath, gave his head a shake. His shout rose hoarsely:

"Aloft to that main tops'l! D'ye hear?"

His first steps were staggering as he pushed into the crowd but the stagger left his legs. He swung his fist and roared:

"Away aloft! And you swabbers clean up this red muck! D'ye hear?"

As soon as he saw sailors eagerly start aloft he turned back to where Ripaudi, with the silken robe drawn tightly about him, had fixed his eyes on Chamlette, now held prisoner in the hands of many men.

Up went Ripaudi's sword-point, flicked the air, came to rest in aim at Chamlette's head. "Give him the knife and

cup of water. Bind him to the bowsprit!"

Men shouted approval, savagely.

The boatswain slapped down a hand on Chamlette's shoulder, jerked. Men crowded along, eager to help and see the punishment.

"These others!" Ripaudi whipped the sword as if slashing, indicating that half-dozen others that had been thrust forward as scapegoats. "Why waste time or chains or have more of a smear to clean from the deck? Overboard with them!" His white teeth gleamed. "Who swims to shore will know God loves him!"

There was a scrambling surge, then the shrill shrieks of men heaved high by the arms of shipmates. The doomed men cursed and accused those who lifted them. A hurtling shape fell over the side; another, then another; and others. Thus the ship was purged.

RIPAUDI mounted the ladder. On the quarterdeck he met the clip-headed old gunner, whose one eye snapped as he said:

"A pocky lot! No wonder we've no prizes! Belly of Jupiter! This pack of mug-tossers stand to a fight? Did you not see? At the first smell of burned powder the dogs turned tail! Blast my mother's soul if once on the *Saint Vincent* we didn't fight the damned crew from noon till vespers and had been there yet, fighting of them, but that a Turk galley mistook us for becalmed. We who had been at each other's throats faced outboard and fought side by side into the night. There were men for you! These pocky turn-tails are but tavern brawlers!"

Cado Mosto looked pinched of face, like a man who is ill. He spoke solemnly:

"A narrow squeak!"

"Pah!" said Ripaudi. "A fight's a fight. You win it or you don't!"

"It is the second mutiny this voyage!"

"And may not be the last!" Ripaudi drew his robe more tightly about him. After much sweating at hot work the wind and spray-mist touched his nakedness with a chill. "A crew engaged to cut throats would as soon cut ours as any!"

Cado Mosto sucked in his breath.

The apple-faced Dutch sailing master waddled about, frowning and strutting as if he had done much in the brawl; but his mate, who had been on watch, said:

"That Englishman stayed the rush. I had never thought one man could do it!"

"So I saw. And wonder!" Ripaudi faced about to get another look at Herrack. "I had thought he would have led it! Let him take Chamlette's place as boatswain's mate. Let him berth aft. Best have aft men we know are honest. Jehan?"

The pretty-faced, evil-eyed clerk came near.

"Jehan, tell that Englishman to come to me within an hour. I owe him thanks. He fights well."

Ripaudi hurried off the deck.

"Fights well, eh? Fights well!" said the old gunner with a splutter of oaths. "'Tis well he does! And how well we know from that cursed *Alexander* of his! That's a fault with the damned English! Let me die o' thirst a-swim in wine, if one in twenty of your English heretics be worth the sweat of looting! Yet try the looting and you'll see how they stand to it! 'Tis a pocky chance you'll find naught better aboard 'em than sour beer, much wool, tar and salt fish! Aye, they fight harder for a cask of dead herring than honest Christians for their king's treasure. Aye, and they'll make more ado in giving up two boards and a rag than the devil his nose when St. Dunstan clapped it with hot iron! Board a Christian ship and at least you find jewels and gold in their crucifix; but the English will not have even a cross on board for us to kneel to in praise of God

for victory after we've cut their throats! Pah!"

CHAPTER X

SEA JUSTICE

HERRACK kept hold on the cutlass, since there was no handy place to put it aside, except where it might be stolen and hidden away. He went forward, pushed in among the men clustered at the low railing of the high forecastle, overlooking the beak. He gouged with elbows, answered oaths with looks that hit as hard as angered words, and so got to a good view of the body, just forward of the upreared figurehead—the bare-breasted gilt-headed woman under the bowsprit.

Chamlette hung there a-dangle, belly-down, facing the heave of waves that splattered him with spray.

A cup was tied to one wrist, to the other a knife. The cup was supposed to have water in it. Chamlette's choice was to live and starve under the stares and jeers of shipmates, or cut himself loose and drop.

A lean old sailor with skin like the neck of a tortoise stood with arms folded and eyes in a solemn stare at the body on the bowsprit.

" 'T ain't fair justice," he mumbled as Chamlette's weak and wind-muffled cries were swept back to the forecastle.

" 'T ain't fair justice!"

"How so?" said Herrack. "He risked and lost. Two slashes of the knife and he's but gone ahead of us to hell. In some few days, or years at most, we follow!"

The lean old seaman turned his salt-tanned face. "They broke his arms first!"

"The boatswain?"

"No seaman befouls sea justice! The louse-bitten idlers, to make better sport. Have some'at to gawk and mock!"

"But the boatswain—"

"Give 'im to me and went aloft on work. The landsmen idlers took the lad, broke his arms cruel and tied him there. Do you not see the blotch-wrought knots?"

A cry, faint of sound, great with agony, came back. Some men cupped their hands and shouted taunts in answer.

"You are right!" said Herrack. "He has the right to a choice. I'll give it him!" He swung a leg over the rail, showed the cutlass he held.

The old sailor caught at Herrack's shoulder. "Nay, nay! They'll lash you there in his stead!"

"I give them leave to try!" Herrack swung forward, made his way down and across the beak grating, climbed up with a hand grasping the gilt hair of the great-breasted figurehead. He leaned into the wind, called:

"Do you choose the sea, Chamlette?"

The answer came weakly in French. "Let me die! In God's name, let me die!"

"Aye!" said Herrack and struck. Two blows and the lashings about Chamlette's legs parted. With far reach of cutlass, Herrack struck again and the rope about Chamlette's breast was cut.

He fell with legs and broken arms outspread in downward flight and was buried in the curl of a wave the bow turned over on top of his sinking body.

A babble broke loose on the forecastle; the angered voices were loudest.

Herrack turned back and met staring faces. Voices snapped this and that. Herrack was not liked. His caste was above them; his contempt was not concealed. Also, some of them having been in the plot with Chamlette, they made much reproach of easing his punishment, as if by such words they somehow hid their own guilt.

"Ought to be hung there till dry as stockfish!" said a loud voice. As Herrack came to the rail the same fellow lurched half over, shouted, "Who ordered that?"

"The same as ordered this!" said Her-

rack. With one hand he took a firm grasp on the rail, the other swung back, swung up the cutlass and would have split the man's head wide. Herrack knew him for one who had urged men on in the fight but had lifted no weapon himself.

As the fellow jerked himself back to dodge he was caught by a fist blow alongside the head.

"I ordered it!" thundered Boatswain Locke. "Who the devil else gives orders here? And who mislikes them, let him say so!"

The boatswain put a hand under Herrack's arm, half pulled him up and over the rail. He took the cutlass, stabbed it down into the thick, doubly-slit leather hanger.

"Clear the forecastle! Seamen need footroom!" He turned, slapped Herrack's shoulder, gave him a shove. "Go aft as you are, unwashed! Our captain asks for you!"

Herrack half laughed. "He's catlike and a brave one! But I'm too much dog! He'll spit and I'll growl!"

The boatswain looked steadily into Herrack's face and a slow smile moved over the thick lips. "Sheep-shank your tongue for him. But whatever you ask of me, money, maid or a man's life—'t is yours! I've been told what use you made of this blade while I lay like a sick slut in a faint!"

HERRACK was soiled with the grime of work and fighting, besplattered with the blood of those he had slashed. He heaved up a bucket of salt water and rinsed himself. It freshened but scarcely cleansed.

As he sloshed he wondered what Ripaudi would say. There was more to that popinjay than his feathers. Naked as a babe, he had fought fiercely, with skill.

The clerk Jehan was on the lookout for Herrack's coming, met him at the top of the ladder. A delicate-seeming youth with girlish lips and evil eyes, gifted in scholarship, as became one who had been secretary to a bishop; also crafty and ironic.

"Come along, Englishman—or madman! 'Tis one and the same name!"

Herrack looked at the richness of the lad's curled hair and garb. He wore a velvet cap with a gold-set jewel in it, ruffled collar, bright crimson doublet, and flowing cloak with a jeweled dagger. The youth was a favorite with Ripaudi.

Herrack thought him fit to be squashed between thumbnails like a louse.

"Men go to sea, endure cold, wet, eat swill, fight hard and often die," said Herrack with a hard look, "that you may wear velvets, eh?" He pointed at the dagger. "Wherefore do you go armed? And if blood doesn't make you pale, why weren't you on deck this morning?"

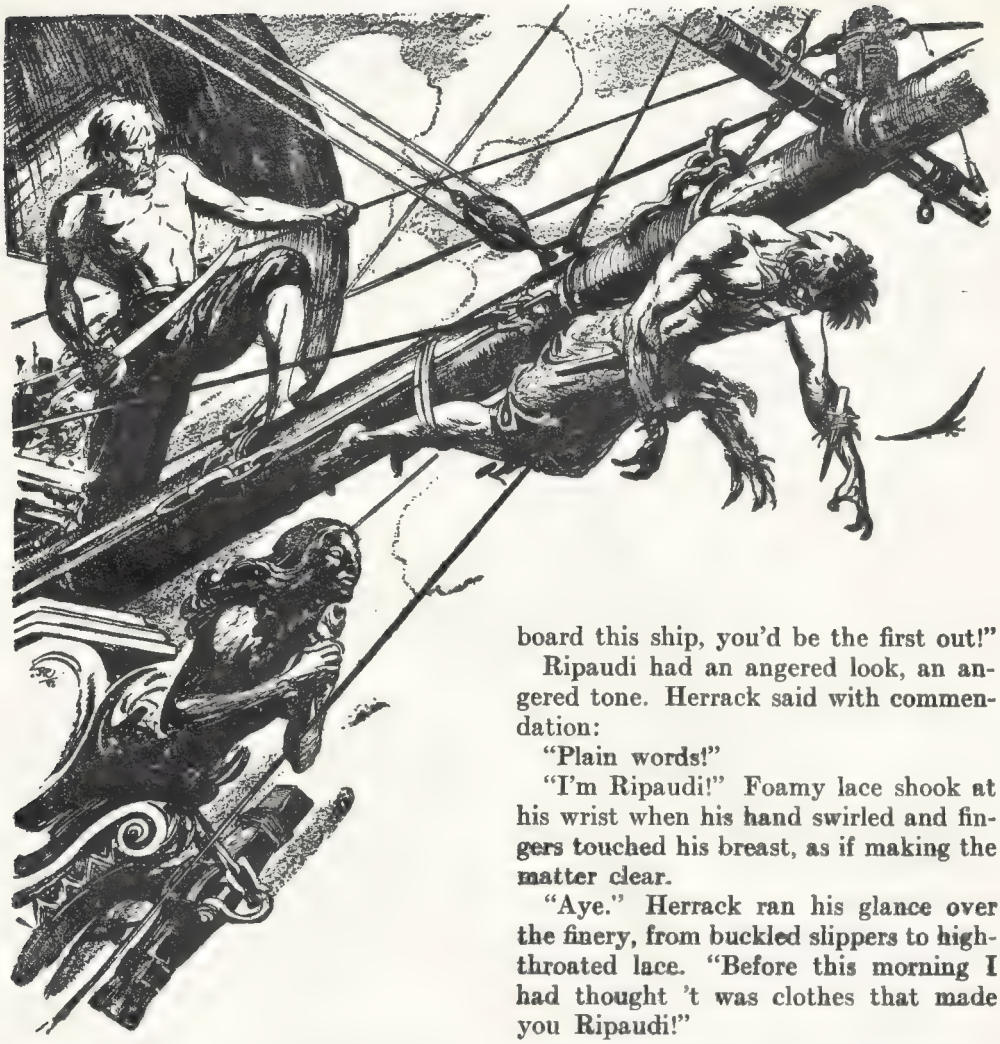
Jehan laughed easily. "Would quarrel with me? I said *madman!* This dagger?" He fingered the jeweled handle. "I'm scrivener and must sharpen quills. And this morning? Ah, being a churchman, I prayed. And lo! victory!"

There was such smooth impudence in the rascal that Herrack's glower lost its frown. "When this ship sinks, the fish that swallows you will have an ache in its belly. Lead on!"

"Would quarrel with me? Ho!" said the clerk coolly. "I am no fool." His dark eyes had a steady look, his lips were a-smile. "I know when a man in the jostle and stir of ship-life will come up like the bigger pebbles in a shaken pan. So whether you like or no, I am your friend, madman! Come along!"

JEHAN left him at Ripaudi's cabin when a Moor opened the door.

Herrack stepped in, stood broad and straight in torn clothes that were blood-smeared.



Ripaudi drank hot spiced wine from a two-handled silver bowl. The spicy smell of the fumes made the air balmy. The wine had warmed him until the velvet cape about his shoulders was too heavy. It lay across the back of his tall chair. His shirt, beruffled of lace, was creamy white. His beard and hair were brushed. His eyes gleamed along the falcon nose and studied Herrack with piercing look. The look did not change as he said:

"I've cursed you from the day you came on board. Been troubled of nights by your face in my sleep. I had thought when devils heaved up hell's hatches on board this ship, you'd be the first out!"

Ripaudi had an angered look, an angered tone. Herrack said with commendation:

"Plain words!"

"I'm Ripaudi!" Foamy lace shook at his wrist when his hand swirled and fingers touched his breast, as if making the matter clear.

"Aye." Herrack ran his glance over the finery, from buckled slippers to high-throated lace. "Before this morning I had thought 't was clothes that made you Ripaudi!"

Ripaudi scowled, then laughed with a tight throat. "A soldier fights as the alarm rouses him. No better armor for a naked man than a naked sword. Wounds of God! You, too, fight well! The mystery of it is you fought for me. Why so?"

Herrack did not reply at once.

"You thought," Ripaudi suggested, "your father will be less tortured, eh, if the *Renegado* gets ransom demand from gentlemen than from tavern cutthroats? That was it?"

"I'll not deny it!"

Ripaudi took a swallow of wine, wiped his mustache with his fingers, fingered

his beard. "But here, sit down. Drink your fill of hot wine."

Herrack sat on a broad chair overlaid with tapestry. The Moor slave poured steaming wine into a silver cup embossed with silver grapes and leaves. He drank deep of the wine. It was good wine.

Ripaudi twitched an earring, plucked the beard's tip, looked this way and that. There was much about this Englishman he did not like; still, with grudging, he said:

"You are now boatswain's mate. Will berth aft. Come. Drink more wine!"

Herrack drained the cup, let it rest on his knees. The Moor came noiselessly and took the cup, filled it from a great silver pot, offered it again humbly.

"Drink!" said Ripaudi.

Herrack lifted the cup, drank, pressed his lips to suck out the last rich drop of cinnamon spice which, as all merchants knew, was precious as gold.

Ripaudi signaled; the Moor refilled the cup.

"Drink!" said Ripaudi.

Herrack drank willingly, understanding that this Italian wanted his tongue loosened.

"Think you," Ripaudi asked, leaning forward, "she could foresee that you would have won this fight? Stop men that rushed aft to cut our throats?"

"What she sees, foresees, or doesn't see, I know not!"

Ripaudi insisted, "But what do you think of her?"

"Naught to me but a parcel with legs and a tongue. Half Moor and wholly devil! I was to carry her from one place to another and leave her. A long journey and a heavy burden!" Herrack's voice and look was that of a man who has said all there is to say.

Ripaudi stared, gloomily unsatisfied.

Herrack berthed aft in a narrow room with two gunner's mates, one a fat German, the other a fat Italian, both powder-scarred. Their jolly jabbering was about the pretty girls of Zara and merry taverns. Why else did men go out to sea for money? They thought Herrack a sour fellow and sorry company because he would say nothing of women he had known.

His work was more about the quarterdeck than formerly. He drove men hard as the boatswain himself, used fewer words, more blows.

The apple-faced Dutch master spoke in a timid manner with friendly warning, saying these men were devils and would stab in the dark.

"In hell," said Herrack, showing a fist, "little devils obey the bigger devils. This is hell!"

The clerk and bugler, Jehan, standing near, overheard and his smile followed Herrack as he went by.

At times in the bustle Herrack came within arms' reach of Mariuma, who took the air, warmly cloaked, with Carlos or Pietro lounging not far off. He did not look at her when near, but from afar often watched as she and Ripaudi walked together, the Italian captain very courteous.

In the early dark of a windy evening she came off the deck. At the cabin door Pietro gave her a lighted candle and in the Virgin's name wished her sweet dreams. She smiled and thanked him with hint of special liking. He closed the door and began pacing to and fro in the passageway.

Jehan came out of the darkness to keep Pietro company, leaned against the door, murmured of trifles and smiled in the dim low of the standing lantern. The Ethiopian giant and the small girlish clerk were friends.

Mariuma moved across the cabin with a sheltering hand before the candle wick and lighted two other candles that were set in a wire cage above a brass dish suspended from a beam. The brass dish had water in it as a precaution against fire.

She pulled the cloak from her shoulders and turned to drop it on the bed. Her body became motionless. She gasped, gave a start, and the cloak fell about her feet on the deck:

"You!"

The word was a whispered scream. Herrack was standing close up against the bulkhead. He smiled grimly and stepped close. She was frightened. Her lips flashed, but in whispers:

"Why are you here? You cannot get away unseen. We both will lose our heads! Have you become mad? I have the mind to scream and—"

"Scream, then!" he growled.

"Shh-sh, speak lower!" She pointed in warning at the door. "Why are you here? You cannot escape!"

"But if I don't, your friend Ripaudi will think this is not our first meeting!"

"Oh, I could kill you!"

"You saved my head. For that, I thank you—a little. Not much. It may be, later, I'll thank you more. So—"

"Fool!" she put her face very near to his. "I did not want Captain Ripaudi to kill you! I want to do it myself some day!"

"I hope you do. 'T will win me pardon of God!"

Mariuma's hands lifted, trembling, as if to lay hold of his great powerful body, tear it to pieces.

"You said I had a father. I have wondered why, but guessed that you had hope that if I lived I might somehow get you free of Ripaudi. You know him better now and show a liking. I doubt if you still have that hope. But it is why I'm here. To ask! What do you say?"

Mariuma breathed deeply two or three times. Her pretty face became less tense and lurking impudence peeped through her eyes as her fingers absently felt about her hair. "He is a gentleman, that Ripaudi."

"True!" said Herrack and seemed strangely to mean it.

"You"—her tone had wonderment—"like him, then?"

"A fine gentleman, of lofty ideals and such high honor that he thinks the woman who would fling her father's secret and very life to pirates is naught but a worthless slut! Any gentleman must!"

A look like fire appeared in her tawny eyes. She clenched her fists, stood straight and rigid.

"Oh!" she gasped.

"Ha, he's courteous and kind to you. He feeds and clothes you well. Wants you cared for—as any rare monkey worth a fabulous sum!"

"Oh! I swear by Allah, God, Mahomet, that I will tell him enough to make him kill you!" Her hand struck out at Herrack's face, yet she kept her voice in a whisper.

Herrack slapped down the hand. "Then I also will tell him things!"

"Lies!"

"But he won't know that."

"Why do you rage at me?" Her voice almost broke. "What have I done but the best that could be done?"

"I've no love of Sidi Hamet. But I had thought him too worthy a man to be cursed by a daughter that would fling his wealth, his life, everything, wild-tongued to pirates!"

"But what could I have done? I thought—"

"Of yourself only!" Herrack growled. "With your gift for lying—yet the one time when a lie is needful, you out with the truth! And such truth as puts Sidi Hamet where he cannot strike a blow to defend himself! You had a queen's wealth of jewels and cast them like grain to pigeons! They would have confirmed any story of any father's wealth and willingness to pay your ransom. But nothing would serve your pride except that Sidi Hamet must be named—and damned!"

MARIUMA stood confused and almost tearful. Humbly she asked, "What can I do?"

"Ha, that's the woman's way! She ruins a father, husband, some man she loves, then thinks she's purged of fault if she but squeezes a tear!"

"Oh what can I do?"

"Well, praying will be a worthy pastime for your idleness! So beg your Allah to send some strong English ship that will capture this pirate! If he lacks influence with the English, let your Allah send any good stout Christian vessel and make these pirates mad enough to attack one that can o'ermatch them!"

"You make a mock of me!"

"I lack the hope that your prayers or mine are worth lip-effort. So it seems best to plan what can be done otherwise. What I want to know, and what it may be you can inveigle out of Ripaudi, is why this ship stands so far out in the Atlantic, off Africa or Spain. And does Ripaudi mean to return to Venice? From the talk I hear a prettier woman than you awaits his coming at Zara!"

She caught her breath. "Oh! I hate him!"

"No. You merely hate *her*. Magda's the name. And from what I hear, I swear she would let her own throat be ripped wide before she'd give her father's secret to men like these." Learn if he means to return to Venice—or Zara."

"Zara. He has said so."

"Hm." Herrack looked thoughtful. "I know how to reach friends from Zara. And the first message I send, even if it takes all I can earn at sea as pirate, is to Sidi Hamet with the warning of what has befallen. I keep faith when I pledge it—even with *renegados!* Else I had broke your neck long ago and been eased of my troubles!"

Mariuma spoke like a very small, weary little girl. "Oh, I wish you had."

Herrack pushed at her. "Go open your door. Tell your Negro that you cannot sleep and must walk about until you are weary. When he has followed you on deck, I'll leave."

"But you must not come in here again. It is dangerous!"

"There is no danger in it. But I won't again. I have no wish to make Ripaudi share your company with me!"

Without the least warning her hand flew up against his face.

"Some day," she hissed, "I will do that with a knife!"

She blew out the candles as if spitting on them, went to the door, opened it and called as sweetly as if never in her life she had been angry:

"Pietro? Pietro! I cannot sleep and must go on deck to walk until more tired."

HERRACK peered into the dim passageway, then stepped out, closed the door.

Jehan appeared with mouth a-smile under the dim lantern. His cap was tilted back and his cloak's hem was tossed up over a shoulder.

"Now," said Herrack in a careless way and jerked his head, "that port will not let water in."

Jehan laughed with a mocking titter and had a care to keep far enough away. "I saw you enter there, so I came here and waited. Also I leaned my ear to the door and listened!"

Herrack laughed boldly. "Well trickster, too late now! You should have run to call and tell! Let Ripaudi find me there! I'm out and the door is closed. I'll call you liar! And so she will she. Also Pietro!"

"Having been born and brought up a churchman, when I lie I am believed!" Jehan edged nearer, smiling.

"I hear Ripaudi snapped his pistol at you a day or two ago. He will take good care the powder is fresh the next time if you spread false tales!"

Jehan came still closer, balanced himself to the rocking of the ship, smiling

teasingly. "You are a rude fellow. You smell of tar. Your nose needs wiping! If I were not determined to be your friend—"

"What do you hope of friendship with me, rogue?"

"I have often wondered," said the unruffled clerk, "what an honest man would be like. I never expected to meet one. As I expected, I find him a fool!"

"Honest? I?"

Jehan's eyes were black, bright. "Who else but a fool keeps faith with a *renegado?*"

Herrack laid a hand on him. "Come. Let us go somewhere where it will be convenient for me to break your neck!"

"Bellarus plays cogged dice against the captain. We can go to the cabin I share with the potgut."

"Lead on."

Jehan pulled the cloak's end from his shoulder and walked ahead with lighthearted swagger to the cabin, entered, threw off his cap, pointed to a chair and seated himself.

A candelabra like that in Mariuma's room burned overhead. Herrack eyed with no liking the youth's smiling face, encircled with dark curls.

Jehan's wicked eyes sparkled. "I can read your thoughts, boatswain. You are saying now to yourself, 'If I but throttle this puny rascal, carry him through the dark to the ship's side and drop the body overboard—then I'll have nothing at all to fear!' Is it not so?"

Herrack did not take his eyes off the lad's face. He spoke slowly. "No. I was thinking that quite enough would be done if I throttled you, drove home your own dagger and left your body for the drunken Bellarus to stumble over!"

"So?" Jehan put his hand to the jeweled hilt, toyed a moment, drew the dagger and tossed it to the table, where it clattered by Herrack's elbow. The clerk's dark and merrily wicked eyes mocked him.

Herrack picked up the dagger, fingered the blade. It was sharp. He laid it by. "You play boldly, my pretty rascal. And to win—what?"

Jehan shrugged his shoulder, then fingered a curl into place.

Herrack asked, "Do you fear Ripaudi?"

"Not so much as that!" He snapped thumb and finger.

"You are a dainty youth to be in such company as this ship. Seem more like a lady's page!"

"And have been page, boatswain, to the finest lady on earth. Donna Magda of Zara!"

"What did you steal from her?"

Jehan laughed. "Jewels. Wine. Money. This dagger."

"What devil's dam fed you pap that in so few years you have grown into so much the knave?"

"Tut tut! Only a brawny heretic would so miscall my sweet and learned Abbess Catena in the fair city of Paris. She was my nurse, godmother—mayhap mother, as scandal says. My father, a madman Englishman, was supposed to have left me in a nunnery when I wore swaddling clothes. When I was the man-grown age of seven, my father came from the wars and took me into camp. He was a captain of Burgundian horsemen. With one hand he rubbed my nose in books, with the other put a sword between my fingers, teaching me what he knew of both books and swords. He cursed my girlish looks and swore to make me man."

"And failed!"

"He died. In my fourteenth year I was left to snatch what the world offered, however I could. Be sure of it, I seldom went hungry, or in rags. In time I was employed by a bishop who made a pilgrimage to Rome. What wickedness was unknown to such minor devils as pages, grooms, the Burgundian roisterers of my father's camp, I learned from my Lord Bishop's companions!"

Herrack picked up the dagger and

twitched it point-first into the table top, watched it vibrate. "Tell me, does this Donna Magda of yours serve the Piombos?"

"Loathes them."

"But loves Ripaudi?"

"About as a leper loves her whiteness. Suffers, prays, cannot be cured. Love is a kind of leprosy."

Herrack stood up. "I've an idle night and want sleep." He looked sharply at Jehan. "Why did you choose to keep your mouth closed tonight?"

Jehan tightened his mouth, pursed the lips. He clasped a knee with folded hands, leaned back. "My father knew swords at a glance. My Lord Bishop books. I know men!"

Herrack frowned, studied the clerk's face. "You have tonight overheard so much that a little more will not hurt. Tell me. Would you be mightily grieved if another mutiny were more successful than the last?"

"I'll not help!"

"I can reward you well."

"I believe you, but—" Jehan spoke simply with mild dark gaze on Herrack's face. "You are not one to love traitors. You would treat me better than Ripaudi does, but hate me more. You would be polite to me and turn your back so as not to smell the rogue!"

Herrack was amused. "Most likely so."

"Ripaudi may some day pistol me. He has Satan's own frenzied temper. But if he shot me dead he would be sorry. You, being an honest fool, would never murder me. But if I fell overboard, you'd say, 'Thank God.'"

"There is more wisdom in your head than appears on your face. I make the guess your loyalty to Ripaudi is mostly love of this Magda girl!" Herrack put a hand to the clerk's throat, closed his fingers. "Yesterday, I had sworn if ever I touched you 'twould be to break this neck!" Herrack let the hand fall, pulled the dagger from the table, offered it hilt-first. "You are more rogue than I thought. And a bold gamester. What have you hoped to win?"

The clerk's black eyes sparkled. "I hope to become steward in your household when you become father to the *Renegado's* grandchildren!"

Herrack shouted in laughter, tweaked Jehan's nose. "And I had begun to think there was some sense in this curled pate!" He tousled the curled pate roughly and went out, still laughing.

CHAPTER XI

"ARE YOU A COWARD?"

ON a clear sunshiny dawn the lookout in the maintop cupped his hands to bellows-mouth and roared below:

"A sail! Sail—ho!"

At once there was great clatter and eagerness among the pirates, hopeful words and some prayers to saints.

The *Maddalena* laid all sails before the slack wind and made for the dim glint that looked like a low transparent cloud on the horizon. All the morning men were rushing aloft. After a time they came down with eyes popping and mouths stretched wide in big oaths. Only the liars among them said they had ever before seen such a big ship.

By noon the pirate had drawn near and all about her decks was a peevish cursing, with every eye on the big-paunched galleon whose many-storied decks rose to a towering poop castle.

The galleon labored listlessly with all great sail spread to the light wind. She rolled her high-castled poop like a proudly drunken alderman his belly. She was laden to sluggishness and wallowed with majestic insolence, like a sleepy mastiff. Port lids were lifted and cannon looked out by way of casual warning.

The pirates licked lean lips: "Mayhap from the Americas" . . . "Spanish car-

rick" . . . . "weighted with gold!" . . . . "And soldiers! Can see the glint of breastplates!" . . . "there's need of ladders to reach her deck!" . . . . "and the need of some hundred or two more men than are among us to clear them, once they are reached!" . . . . "God curse such luck! A fortress afloat!"

Herrack eyed the galleon with willing hunger. It were good honest work, and pleased God, to cripple Spaniards and take away the gold they got from their slave mines in the Americas.

"Her sides 'ud take round shot as a dough raisins," said a sailor in a loud voice, then asked of Herrack, "What do you say?"

Herrack looked at the fellow from the corners of his eyes, not saying anything. He wished for the muscular, ferocious Uskobs who climbed where there was no footing, and once on board were never beaten off. This mongrel crew, savage, brutal, lawless, were brave enough as sea-work went; but the fact that they now stood idly peevish when there was so much of a prize to be had for the taking, showed how undeserving they were of the prize.

Clusters of soldiers and sailors loitered about the galleon's decks. There seemed also a whole swarm of passengers, some in petticoats. The pirates gazed afar as hungry men look through a baker's door, sniffing, lingering, wisely not daring.

"What do you say?" Herrack asked of the boatswain.

The boatswain gave his cap a twitch, rubbed his bristly chin. "I have seen more 'n one tall Don strike." He drew a long wink. "But not to the like of us. There was Frobisher, Drake, Hawkins! I tell you, God hates Spaniards, else he had ne'er raised up such men to fight them!"

"Then we lie off and lick our lips?"

The boatswain swore blasphemously. "We are owned by merchant adventurers. Them Piombos. Must bring the ship home stuffed with loot—but take no risks! We sail on shares, but dare not fight above our size! And we're not pirates, lad! Nay, never!" He grunted, making mock of his own words. "If by God's help, or hell's—'tis no matter to seamen—we stowed yon galleon below our hatches, she'd be reported as having attacked us! And to take pirates—that's why we're afloat!"

RIPAUDI, high on the poop, fingered his beard and tucked its ends into his mouth, gnawing. He squinted one eye, widened the other and when he spoke he cursed. Cado Mosto serenely did not hear.

Jehan, rigged out in his best finery, loitered near by, slanted to catch what was said.

"The devil take me!" Ripaudi swished his cloak more tightly about his body. "If ever I go to sea again for your beggarly merchants, there will be a consort! Make note of that in your tablets, Signior Cado Mosto! Were there two of us we'd board that galleon!"

Cado Mosto mused with wrinkled lips slightly pursed.

The apple-faced Dutchman gave command to take the bonnet off the mizzen lateen. Herrack led men at the work as heartily as if he approved of the Dutch master.

A man jabbed Herrack's side, turned his head, said, "Look below!"

Lilla Mariuma came on the quarterdeck with the squat Carlos, ax on his arm, at her heels. His walk had the shambling stride of a big-bodied ape.

Mariuma was wrapped about in a mantle of gold-shot threads; gold-edged lace weighted the mantle's hem. Perfume floated from her and her dress was ruffled in the draft that poured from the lateen. Her tawny eyes had a look of fire in them.

She faced aft, looked up at Ripaudi. Her voice was a shriek of anger pitched to a key that must be heard on all sides:

"A corsair, *you!*" Mariuma's arm swept forward, trailing the wind-shaken mantle folds. "There, a Spanish galleon! And here, not a man in arms! Are you cowards?"

"By the five wounds of Christ!" Ripaudi jumped as if from some stab-thrust in the back. He came running down the poop ladder with hands flying in wild gestures. "You call me coward! You think I do not dare? You Moorish slut, I'll—"

Squat Carlos growled deep in his throat like a dog that bristles its hair and swung the ax off his forearm. Black Pietro hunched down his shoulders, curled back his lips. But Ripaudi had stopped short, struck with amazement by the fury in her face, the clarion fierceness in her voice:

"Men of the *Maddalena!* You can take that galleon!"

Men, clustered at the bulwarks, where they watched the galleon, all faced about.

Mariuma whirled toward Black Pietro. She closed the fingers of both hands on his bare arm:

"Pietro, will you fight?"

He, sluggish of speech, fingered the crucifix that hung on his breast and, being a simple fellow, thought her face saint-like. "No enemy, my lady, has asked twice!" She patted his great bare arm.

"Carlos?"

Carlos grinned and licked his lips. "My lady, yes!" Carlos had more love of pleasing so pretty a woman than of staying alive.

Mariuma ran to the break of the quarterdeck, drew herself up tall and straight. Her garments fluttered out in the wind as she extended both arms, palms down, in silence asking for silence about the decks.

Her voice went far and clear in a shrill, oracular pitch:

"I tell you—I, the Moor-born prophetess of Tripoli—that galleon is yours for the taking!"

Men gaped and stirred. She was beautiful with a queenly air as if she had the right to command them:

". . . if you are cowards, my curse be upon you!"

"No, no! We are not cowards!"

". . . may darkness strike your eyes! May your flesh rot from your bones! May the gibbet's halter stretch your necks until—"

Cries, yells, howls came at her and arms beat the air. Above all others, one strong voice: "Put us 'longside that ship of Spain and we'll—" The voice was lost in cheers.

She swore her father's oaths: "Blood of God! I have loved you as men! But may this ship split under your feet if—"

Yells of wild acclaim answered her. What else she said was lost in clamor, uproarious, defiant. Men cried orders one to another and followed them, running about purposefully. Drummers without command beat to quarters, the fierce roll throbbing over the deck.

THE youth Jehan, with a bugle in hand, watched as Herrack swung aloft, caught at him, whispered:

"You asked, for I heard you, that she pray Allah! Now is it not best that we too pray him, or somebody, for ways of escape?"

"Aye, lad! She has a woman's lack of reason, and that is a noble folly with which to serve the devil! I thought her Allah would send a Dutchman or a Frenchman to capture us! These Spaniards will flay alive every Englishman that's caught!"

He laughed, pushed Jehan aside and hurried off.

Cado Mosto's meticulous composure was gone and he was frantic. He talked with tense working of lips, as if moulding every word. Ripaudi did not listen but frowned and glared, half closing one

eye, popping the other. He bit his nails and wriggled as if with the itch, crying at her:

"Would make me seem a coward, you she-goat? Before these dogs?"

Mariuma answered in amazed mildness, "I would have you seize the honor that is yours for the daring!"

Cado Mosto put himself between them. To Ripaudi, "You must forbid attack!" To Mariuma, "This is a ship of Spain!" To Ripaudi, "This is madness and failure, too! You have just said so in wanting a consort!" To Mariuma, "To your cabin! Carlos! Take this mad woman to her cabin!"

Carlos grinned, did not stir. She wholly ignored Cado Mosto. He might have been unseen for all the notice she gave him.

She said to Ripaudi, "You are a brave man." The light in her eyes flattered and coaxed; with one sweet word, as is the woman's way, thinking to overcome and erase a mouthful of abusive insults. "I promise victory."

The frantic Cado Mosto caught at the Dutch master. "Stand away from that galleon! Put up the helm! Veer off! There must be no attack!"

"But the crew is mad!" The Dutchman was bloated with fright. "They will not hear!"

"You are the master!" Cado Masto insisted. "Give orders! You are master!"

"Fetch me the boatswain!" cried the Dutch master, striking a younker.

The frightened younker bumped in among hurrying men in the waist, struck against Herrack.

"The master wants you!" he blurted.

Herrack turned back, ran up the ladder.

"I sent for the boatswain!" The master's round face was purplish.

"Your boy told me to come." Herrack started off, but Cado Mosto spoke, and with deft use of hands and quick glances about implied that he spoke not only for himself but for the Dutchman and Ripaudi, too:

"We must bear off. We do not dare attack. It is not the hopeless odds, but Venice and Spain are friends. The woman is mad. We must stand away and leave this galleon!"

"Ho!" Herrack looked Cado Mosto up and down. "Go cry to them that make ready to fight what you say to me! Tell *them* Venice and Spain are not enemies! Tell *them* they must leave gold and loot and women, precious stuff and great jars of wine, because Piombos' clerk thinks it unwise to fight!" He laughed, pointed toward the hive-like swarming. "They arm themselves and will fight! To your prayers, Signior Cado Mosto! Whether you like or no, this ship goes into battle and boards that galleon!"

"Mutiny!" Cado Mosto shouted. "Mutiny!"

"Not mutiny!" Ripaudi cried impulsively. "A curse on Spain and Venice, too! We fight!"

"Folly! Madness!" cried the Dutch master. "I will not put the ship 'longside —Cado Mosto has authority to forbid—"

Herrack shouted with joyful roar, and the round-rumped roundheaded Dutchman went over almost as if seized by the head and flung, so hard was Herrack's blow on the side of his head. Herrack roughly pushed Cado Mosto aside, stood before Ripaudi, shouted in a great merry voice:

"Your orders, my captain! I'm sailing master now!"

Ripaudi's astonishment hung on his face like a frown of doubtful anger. He glared at Herrack, who, like the commonest sailor, wore breeches made of a piece of canvas caught up between his legs and fastened at the waist, and was stripped to the waist to give himself more agility. His hair was tangled, his beard hacked short with a knife, and there was much tar on his hands.

The crew was cheering madly. Herrack was not liked overmuch but the Dutchman was much disliked. Ripaudi showed his teeth, commended Herrack, put out his hand.

Cado Mosto's sharp, wrinkled face was screwed into angered amazement. The Dutchman lay asprawl in a scupperway with fat palm to his head, eyes popping and mouth as wide as if he had a turnip in his throat.

THE hive-like swarming went on all through the ship.

The gunner's crews and helpers labored with budge barrels, bringing powder, racking round shot, fetching langrel in canvas bags to sweep the galleon's waist when luck set her in the trough of a sea as the pirate rose on the crest. The heaviest balls would scarcely jar her massive timbers, but there was hope that the chain shot might rip to tatters the Spanish rigging and set the great ship helplessly a-wallow.

It was to be the hardest, hottest fight the *Maddalena* could make. A trebucket was set up on the forecastle and ball-like pottery jars filled by men who used big wooden spoons, dipping into foul-smelling casks of old butter and rancid grease.

Heavy claw-hooked grapples were brought out, made fast to chains that in turn were made fast to lines. Chains prevented the grapples being readily cut loose. Men rushed in and out about the armory, clapped on morions, took up bucklers; some helped comrades buckle on breastplates, many filled their girdles with dags. Others, since it made them less agile, tore away even their shirts, stood naked to the waist with pistols in belts, cutlasses in hands.

The cooks, with hasty splashing of salt water, put out their fires, took up arms.

The maddest voice of all the wild crew was the gunner's. He loved the smoky roar of guns and his voice was like a gun-blast. He shouted in jubilant fierceness that against so big a mark not a shot would miss.

Even old Bellarus, his throat well drenched with wine, laid aside his robe, tucked up his sleeves, poked his long beard down inside his shirt, and vowed a father's care to those who would have need of him. The Moors hurried up and down ladders below the gun deck to make ready quarters for the wounded.

Harquebusiers clustered with their heavy muskets in readiness near the galley. A few cross-bowmen were stationed in the fore fighting top with arrows that had bulbous heads to carry Greek fire.

Herrack smacked Jehan's back. "Trumpeter! Burst your lungs!"

A blast sounded and in the moment's listening pause that followed, Herrack shouted in a voice that was heard the length and breadth of the *Maddalena*:

"Boatswain, pass the word! Any man that does not board that galleon and stay till she is won will have his feet spiked to this deck!"

"Aye aye!" bawled the boatswain and his pipe shrilled.

Crew and soldiers liked the fierceness of Herrack's warning; they cheered as if drunken.

CHAPTER XII

"STRONG MEN FIGHT HARD!"

THE galleon saw and understood the swarming bustle, was mindful but not alarmed. She flung out the great banner of Spain; and plunged on with sluggish heave and toss, scornfully not touching a sail; but there was brightening gleam of helmets and breastplates about her decks.

"Now, Master Gunner," Herrack shouted in a roistering voice that carried through the ship, "I will give you her stern as a fair mark! If you have lived a good Christian life, all will be

well! But if you have been a drunken heretic, tossed your money to evil girls instead of the church box, sung bawdy songs instead of *Te Laudamus*, we'll soon know of it! To the bow guns and pray!"

The gunner's great hoarse voice led the laughter; it seemed a joyful thing to go into battle with a man that made a heartening jest.

That is, all men laughed except Cado Mosto, who looked as sour as a devil that has swallowed a holy wafer by mistake; and the Dutchman, who still rubbed his jaw; and Ripaudi, who bit his lips and fidgeted in jealous distrust.

And Jehan, now trumpeter, did not laugh but looked down his slender nose with misgivings; he knew how great was Ripaudi's jealousy.

Herrack brought the *Maddalena* gliding down from windward to cross the galleon's stern.

The gunner stood to the breech of the long bow gun, powder-grimed hand sheltering his lone eyes as he peered through the port, judging distance. A boy held the smoldering linstock. An old trumpeter stood by, facing aft. The gunner crouched, sighting, patted the breech, touched delicately the train of priming powder as if to put each grain in a proper place.

As the galleon, with heaving slow plunge, reared her towering stern into the air, the gunner groaned, clapped hand to belly, made grimaces of sickness: so fair a mark and he too far away for even a random shot. He stamped his feet on the sanded deck as if kicking the ship into more swiftness.

The galleon thrust long stern guns far out in a menace of warning and lurched on with lumbering unconcern.

The gunner crouched a long time and muttered. He rose, peered under the shade of his hand, crouched again, held up a hand and took the match from the boy, then growled at the trumpeter.

The trumpeter put the horn to his lips, breathed nervously. Minute after min-

ute crept by, but the excitable old gunner remained patient. He shouted:

"Sound!"

The trumpeter blew a ringing blast.

Far aft, Herrack pushed one of the helmsmen aside and took his place, the better to make sure of the luff.

So well had both the gunner and Herrack judged the sea that at the moment when the *Maddalena* hung in a steady hovering pause, the galleon rose in a great stern-up heave,

The gunner swept the red end of the match into the powder dust at the gun's base and swerved aside, cupped his hand to the lone eye, peered to see where the shot hit.

The gun bellowed, recoiled with terrific jar against the breeching, boomed up a dense cloud of smoke. A man sprang toward the cannon's mouth with a wet sheep-wool sponge.

The men in the foretop had the clearest view. They raised a jubilant yell. Then the men on the forecastle howled gleefully and flourished their arms.

The very first and largely chance-made shot shattered the galleon's rudder stock that a thousand balls might easily have missed.

"God loves me!" cried the gunner, grinning.

Here was heartening omen. Men beat one another over heads and shoulders, joyfully. They faced aft and cried out in frantic faith toward Mariuma, high above them and alone on the poop. She, the Moor-born prophetess of Tripoli who loved them as men, had promised victory; and lo! the galleon lay as crippled as a strong man with both legs broken.

Yet strong men, though crippled, fight hard when it comes to grips.

The galleon's stern guns smoked at the *Maddalena* with bellowing roar. One, then another, another and another! A ball plunged short. One tore through the foresail and slanted into the water. Another plunged into the forecastle bulwark, showering splinters. The spent ball rolled about the deck and was seized sportively, carried to a gunner's mate to see what gun it would fit for refiring. Men yelped, "We are honest men and will return what we find!" Another ball crossed the beam, yardarm high, breaking cordage. The pirates jeered such gunnery.

The galleon wallowed with thunder clouds of smoke rolling up from her side as the *Maddalena* made off before the wind to beat again to windward and take the weather gauge. The galleon could not escape.

It remained to be seen if the *Maddalena* could board and hold her.

THE gunner went aft among the cheers of men who smacked his barrel-shaped naked body. His eye blazed, his mouth gaped in pleased grinning. He bounded up the quarterdeck but did not pause, went on up the poop ladder and at the top step bowed low to Lilla Mariuma as to a saint. He caught up the hem of her long robe, pressed it to his face:

"My lady! My lady!"

Mariuma smiled, put out her hand, laid it on his cropped head. She stooped and spoke in a low voice.

The rough, fierce old gunner was so filled with emotion that tears ran from his lone eye as he backed down the ladder, keeping his face to her.

He rushed up to Ripaudi, roared thunderously in childlike boast:

"But come to windward and keep off! Bring my bow guns to bear! I can outreach her, break her bones, make her strike!"

"Ho ho!" said Herrack. "Old Bone-Breaker! Yon galleon can carry our ship in her biscuit locker. Give her the weight of every ball on board, 't would be no more than fleas in a mattress!"

"Then bring us up athwart her hawse," said Boatswain Locke. " 'T will give Old Thunderbolt the use of all his larboard guns and her none but the bow!"

Herrack modulated his voice to show courtesy to the boatswain, who was one man on the ship he much respected. "Good seamanship, were we of a size or near it. She is a mountain afloat and—"

Ripaudi intruded to settle the matter. "Put our beak against her bow!" He spoke loftily, spinning his sword with whirl of wrist in upward flourish. "We'll board her!"

"You've no wings to fly so high nor ladders to climb!"

"But we can jump!" Ripaudi snapped.

"And be swept off like flies on a cold morning by a maid's broom!"

Ripaudi sneered, "You would have us think you know more about boarding ships at sea than we do!" He squinted an eye, popped the other. It was a mean look the trick gave him.

"I raided lobstermen in my youth!" said Herrack in a way that did not soften the insolence.

The gunner turned his worshipful eye toward Mariuma. "Shall we ask of her?"

Herrack swung him about by a grip on the shoulder. "Since when do we ask of a woman how to fight?"

"She's more than woman!" said the gunner.

"Aye, more devil than most. I'll put you not merely 'longside that galleon but on board her! Boatswain, break out your junk and breast the bow with fenders! We ram her amidships!"

"Ram her!" said the boatswain.

"Ram her?" cried Ripaudi.

Cado Mosto said "Ram—" He broke off in a groan.

"We'll be rived to the gripe!" said the gunner.

"If so, there'll be dry footing on the galleon," said Herrack.

"You mean, *ram* her?" Ripaudi had much the look of awakening from a bad dream. "Our bow will be kindling, fenders or no!"

"Aye, ram her! Shiver her side from waist bulwark to the water! She lies without a helm. We've the weather gauge and she must take us as we come! There's a thousand men or near it on that galleon—"

"And the weight of their falling dead would smother us!" said the gunner.

"So we must clear her deck!" Herrack's hand fell on the old Frenchman's shoulder, shook it. "Gunner, get up a barrel. Have the smith cooper it with iron. Fill it with powder. Put in a short fuse. Bind the barrel with wet canvas." He turned about. "Boatswain, stow it in the sprit top. Make it ready to heave on board the galleon! By God's help or hell's, our bowsprit will overhang her waist like a tree's bough the table beneath it!"

"And," said Cado Mosto in protesting amazement, "if it blows up on our own bow—"

"We'll be shattered into enough planks for each man of us to have one to float on! Hold back the boarders till that barrel blows up! Then we board her through the smoke!"

"But," said the simple gunner, scratching hard at his clipped head, "who will fire that barrel bomb and drop it! Being so directly overhead, he himself will most likely be blown through the sky—and to give his shipmates the joy of wine and girls at Zara! We're all brothers, but none loves another that much!"

"If he lives, let there be added reward." Herrack spoke offhand and in a manner as if he were in command and could apportion shares.

Cado Mosto gathered resolution and anger. His fists shook. "In the name of my owners, the Piombos, I forbid! There is too great risk! Not only in the greatness of the ship, but in the anger of Spain, if she—"

"I'll ride in the sprit top, fire the barrel and drop it!" said Herrack, and waved a hand. "To your quarters and make all ready. And as for you, Signior Cado Mosto, since when have fights been won by caution? Not, I swear, since God Himself flung the devil out of heaven!

Dare you say Almighty God and His hosts were in no peril of defeat—then there were no credit in the victory! And would you take credit from God?"

Herrack laughed at him.

Ripaudi looked on, listened, bit his bearded lips.

HERRACK sent a man to the armory to bring back pistols and the heaviest cutlass. The man, glad to serve, ran and returned breathless. Herrack tried the pistols unloaded. The spring of one would not work. He flung it overboard.

The wheel of the second pistol whirred, struck fire from the flint.

Herrack loaded and primed it with care.

"Yours!" he said, thrusting it at Jehan.

"Mine?" asked the clerk, not eagerly.

"What? Shrink from a dag? Here. Take this for a duty you'll be told of when I go forward to perch myself in the sprit top. Were you fatter and could put more weight to a blow, I'd take you with me as a boarder!"

Jehan took the pistol.

Herrack stood close; with lowered head and voice, as if giving explanation about the pistol's mechanism, he said rapidly:

"Save yourself and that she-devil up there! Get through the smoke and on board that Spaniard. Stay there! If we win, you'll be no worse off than here. If we are driven back, you'll be there! You are a smooth rogue. Use wits! The two of you can lie better than I can advise. I'll be dead unless that galleon strikes! If so, and it is ever so that you can reach the *Renegado's* ears, tell him I could do no more than was done! Tell him I never betrayed a man—nor ever forgave betrayal!"

Jehan turned anxiously. Ripaudi, huddled in his cloak, brooded like a fiery-eyed devil.

There was great haste and to-do forward in cutting and binding old hawser lengths into ponderous fenders to save the bow timbers. Not a voice among the crew made outcry against ramming the galleon. The madness of it pleased their mood. The Moor maid had woven about them spidery wisps of superstition, so that in their fierceness they were without fear.

The bellying sprit sail was furled. Smith and cooper bent and welded iron hoops about the barrel to give its explosion more force. The barrel was filled with powder, then swathed and bound with wet canvas to keep it safer from the Spanish arbalists' fire-bearing arrows. Its bunglesome weight was hoisted into the sprit top, laid on top of the rim and made fast on a net-like sling. The short fuse extended its frayed tip out of copper tubing.

The great galleon lay crippled in the sea's trough with no more helm than a cask adrift. Men could be seen dangling and bobbing at the water's edge astern, trying to make repairs.

The *Maddalena* again came from windward.

Herrack took Jehan by the arm, led him to where the two steersmen stood with feet braced. Knotted knuckles showed the strain of their grip. Their faces were screwed in muscular tension.

"Lad, look you!" Herrack tapped a wheelman's shoulder. "He is as good a helmsman as is on the ship. That is why he is here! He must hold a course that will strike squarely between the galleon's fore and mainmast. Mark it well! If he takes away a hand shoot him through the head!"

Herrack patted the helmsman's shoulder. "You've heard? The lad will do it!"

Herrack bit off the end of a wax candle, took a linstock in hand, pushed his way through the crowded deck, mounted the forecastle, went out along the bowsprit and into the top. He examined the barrel's lashings, drew his cutlass, measured the wring of the blade and his arm, returned the cutlass to its hanger.

The *Maddalena* drove on, plunging her topsails before the wind. At long range the Spanish gunners fretfully began a random fire, praying for such long range luck as would snap a mast, set the pirate flapping aback. The topheavy heeling of the galleon in the sea's trough at times sloshed spray through the lower gun tier's open ports.

The Spaniards thought, as any seamen had to think, that the *Maddalena* was bearing down wasp-like to discharge her guns and veer away. She was not of a size to lie close and endure the sustained weight of Spanish guns. It did not enter a Spanish head that the *Maddalena* meant to board. Boarding was hellish work, hard on the boarders unless they had great numbers.

As the *Maddalena* came on and on the Spanish seamen began a gleeful shout. It began to seem that bad judgment was bringing the pirate so close she could not veer without colliding with the galleon; and the Spaniards eagerly made ready to bind her with grapples and tumble their soldiers upon the *Maddalena's* decks.

Then it seemed the devil tore off hell's hatches and threw them away. The pirate's bow guns opened their sooty mouths, spewing not balls but langrels' broken chain lengths, bolt heads, smithy fragments, that tore Spanish rigging and men into pieces. When langrel came on a ship it meant that boarders would soon follow.

Herrack poked the chewed wax tightly into his ears. The blast of the guns from behind him, and their concussion, was terrific.

From the high swaying galleon tops falconets fired impatiently, aiming beyond their range. Arbalists ventured their flaming arrows, aiming high to take a long falling arc.

The galleon's cannons worked fast, grew over hot. They bellowed and kicked against their breeching, bounced beam-high, at times hurled their crews about as ants are swished by a stick. The cannoneers' aim was bad because of the sea's roll. The unhelmed galleon could not give the steadiness of a luff. Sometimes balls rolled from the cannons' mouths, sometimes they were shot skyward. Smoke blew back into the gunports, so that often the aim was merely that of blind men. A heavy, stinking cloud of smoke was hurried by the wind down upon the galleon's waist, like a fog; the men in the tops stood as if isolated on peaks.

Balls struck the *Maddalena's* crowded deck. Men were smashed like bugs underfoot. Some were partially flayed and strangled by the splinters. Many men, fit to die, refused to go below. Battle madness was upon them. They slid their bare feet through their own blood and jostled to hold their places among the waiting boarders. Snagged-toothed, scarred faces grinned and yelped.

Faces often turned in lingering stares toward the height of the poop where the Moor maid stood with the wind sweeping her garments.

Ripaudi wore a black silk shirt and velvet trousers. He stood among the waiting boarders on the forecastle, nervously twitched his drawn sword. No one mistook his fretting for timidity. He had the evil virtue of courage, as great as any man's. His belt was studded with pistols. His black-bearded lips parted in a gleaming nervous smile; again and again his bright dark eyes glistened with a look of hope as he peered toward the bowsprit top.

A pound ball struck through the head of a man beside Ripaudi and blood was splattered on his face. Ripaudi did not look aside. He wiped his face with his hand and looked at his hand, then wiped it on his velvet trousers. The dead man was carried across the deck and pitched overboard.

The Spaniards were thrown into an uneasy flurry almost like panic. They saw in utter amazement that the *Mad-*

dalena had never meant to veer, but to board; not merely board but to ram!

They ran up boarding nets in confused hurry, lowered the main yards and hauled out the sails to make a cover for the waist bulwarks, ranked soldiers there with bucklers. In the screaming haste and jostle with guns roaring and smoke swirling about them, men crossed themselves and mumbled; some dropped knees down in quick prayer, their faces aft toward the ship's chapel.

The cloudbank of the pirate guns rolled down upon the galleon, and the smoky fog was lighted with the sizzling sparkle of arbalists' bombs that scattered fire where they struck. The fiend-like yelling of the pirates came through the boom of the guns. Grenades flew in a sudden shower, scattered flames, and rancid butter to make decks slippery.

The *Maddalena* struck bow-on, amidships.

ALL was instantly dizzied confusion and the havoc sounds of disaster. Under the high splash of water between the two hulls, the galleon's heavy bulwarks gave way as if they were buckram. Deck timbers buckled, snapped, splintered with shrill sounds like screams of pain. The high steeved bowsprit was driven through the outspread mainsail and far athwart the galleon's waist. The sprit topmast snapped amid the tangle of rigging and the sprit top rocked and waggled as if loosened and about to fall.

The shock of the collision knocked men on both decks into a shuffle, flattened some as if they were struck dead, maimed many, killed a few, and put massed men into a swaying scramble. For the space of a half-minute there was a pause as men caught their breath and balance.

Fierce cries went up, a roar of voices. There was rattling snap and blaze of small guns. The astounded Spaniards looked up overhead into the pirate's crowded beak and forecastle that had almost come on board them.

On board the *Maddalena* the cooler men grabbed at shipmates, checking their rush. The boatswain bellowed, "'Ware! In God's name, 'ware!" and slapped with the flat of his cutlass, checking men.

Eyes followed the boatswain's gesture and searched out the form of Herrack who fingered the frayed fuse and pressed the lighted match against it.

Spaniards became aware of the significance of the canvas-wrapped bomb-barrel. Men shot at Herrack from the deck and down from the lofty tops.

The bull-voiced Carlos roared and leaped from the forecastle rail. As often, he was the first to board; as usual, too, had a charmed life. He could board safely aloft, or thought so; and, like a huge ape, went climbing up through the tangled rigging. The ax dangled from his shoulder. Other men followed him. Like furious monkeys, they made for the fighting tops.

The fuse sizzled under Herrack's hand. He dropped the linstock and drew the cutlass, but was so webbed in by the tangle of raffle that there was no room to swing and hack. He put the cutlass edge to the ropes that bound the barrel and sawed. The ropes seemed iron. Seconds drew themselves into the nerve-wrenching apprehension of minutes. The uplifted faces of the crowded Spaniards took on a widening look of terror as they pressed back, each against another.

Herrack, all blackened and begrimed, seemed a devil as he worked away unharmed by bullets. Panic touched Spanish crew and soldiers. They faced about and fought to flee from the waist. Officers cursed and struck, but the frightened men were wiser.

The barrel fell, struck the deck, bounced slightly, rolled with the heaving slant of the deck. Men scrambled from it, ran wildly.

A young officer, a mere lad with plumes

above his head, rushed forward with a bucket of water sloshing about his legs. He coolly bent in a low stoop to see where the fuse was, and, not seeing it, gave the barrel a kick to turn it over. He vanished in the midst of flame.

The jarring roar tore a huge hole in the deck and seemed to press the galleon down into the water. It blasted the foot of the mainmast into splinter-dust and the mast toppled with all sails, stays, cordage in a tangle. The huddle of soldiers in the maintop were spilled out over the side and into the sea as shrimps are tossed from a wicker basket.

Every man on the galleon's deck was knocked off his feet, and some were knocked into the sea. Others were thrown so hard against bulkheads and stanchions that they died with bones crushed into splinters that stabbed their vitals. Smoke, yellowishly black, rolled over the deck.

The pirates boarded through the smoke. They charged on numbed, bewildered men.

It was an hour of utmost fury; a jumbled fight, as much a *mêlée* as if they were all enmeshed in nets. Soldiers in the fore and mizzen tops showered down grenades. Carlos, bull-voiced, cried men to heel and swarmed up through the smoke to rout out the soldiers. From aft, women's voices rose in screams. Fire swung its red fangs up from splintered planks; Spaniards and pirates together threw buckets into the sea and drew them up, splashed at the fire. Dead and dying were all about the deck, some in windrows of distorted shapes.

The two ships rocked and clashed together, entangled by grapples and cordage that creaked and snapped with wild fling of broken ends. Sea water was churned up and splattered through the broken side of the galleon. When the water drained off, it was dyed with crimson.

The pirates broke into groups and each group became a gusty swirl of men that charged with shock of bodies and clash of steel wherever the Spaniards made a stand. The pirates had a cat-like quickness and ferocity, were blood-drunken, without mercy and without hope of mercy. Oaths, curses, prayers, were mingled in shrill outcries. Men fell from the fighting tops, headlong.

As the smoke sifted leeward there could be seen a tall priest in white and gold vestments upright on the poop. He held a crucifix toward heaven as he prayed.

HERRACK, sprit top, boom and all, would have been blown skyward had not the barrel bounced and rolled with the heave of the ship before it blew up. The bowsprit had vibrated like a bough in a gale. The flash and jar of the explosion blinded and numbed him, so that he lay for a time as if half dead. He roused himself dizzily, climbed over the top's rim, came down off the bowsprit with shift of hands on the dangling ropes to steady himself, moved with the slow groping of a dazed man.

He rubbed his eyes and reeled to the heave of the deck, then pulled at the wax wadding in his ears. His mouth was parched. He drew the back of his wrist across his lips and the wrist was streaked with powder grime. His face had the color of a blackamoor's.

All about he heard the shout of "Adown! Adown!" as the pirates beat at men about the hatchways.

Suddenly from aloft came a gleeful roar in a bull's voice:

"We are the Moor-maid's men!"

Carlos' bull-like roar stirred instant echoes in pirate throats. "For the daughter of the *Renegado!*" "Adown! Adown! Ask quarter of our maid! . . . maid of Tripoli!"

Herrack grinned with open mouth, laughed. Here was a queer backlash of fate: Mariuma, with woman's guile, had sent the pirates into a hopeless fight—hoped for their destruction. They had

won the fight and were yelping her name with sounds of evil worship!

A burly shape leaped at Herrack with lifted cutlass. It was Boatswain Locke. He lowered the cutlass in backward sweep of arm. "Hey-ho! God spit on me! But I knew no man with a bearded black face was among us!" He swore terribly in a joyous voice. "No greater prize was ever won by fewer men!" The boatswain looked and talked drunkenly, but had not yet touched liquor. "Doomed men fight hard but doomed they are!"

A great shadow fell on the deck. They looked up. Carlos had routed out the soldiers of the fighting tops and now cut away the great banner of Spain.

"There," said the boatswain, flinging up his cutlass point at the great banner, "is stuff for every man's new breeks! When this fight is done I'll drink a tun of wine! How the girls of Zara will cheer our home-coming!"

"Aye, and gamesters click their heels and bounce for joy."

"Belike! Why care? More prizes are at sea to be had for the taking! God's name! When you make a fight—you fired that ship of yours to board our own and nearly won us! You drove ours athwart this galleon so there was no escape for us but victory! You've been a sea captain somewhere in your day. Will be again! And I'm your man, though I must go as grommet!" The boatswain grinned.

"We'll talk of that soon. Come to it!" Herrack pointed where the fight went on. "Here's work to finish. No piracy either! For England still wars with Spain and we are Englishmen!"

A GRAY-BEARDED captain in armor that glistened as if all gold and jewel-studded stood at the front of the men who defended the quarterdeck from the crowded starboard ladder. The other ladder had been hauled up.

Ripaudi led the fight on the ladder, stood near the topmost step. There was no armor on him. His black hair flew in the wind as he feinted, slashed, thrust, all with dazzling fury. The precious sword gleamed and hacked steel without dulling the sharpness of its edge.

The Spanish captain had been through many wars. He and his soldiers were awkward in laminated corselets and solid-breasted cuirasses, but they were brave men. Those about the captain leaned far over the rail to strike and were struck at in a furious quickness that made blades hiss through the air. The pirates that crowded up on the ladder behind and nearly beside Ripaudi were in a frenzy.

On both sides there was much firing of pistols and cavaliers by men who stood well back of the press. One of the gunner's mates carefully aimed a harquebus on its staff and fired.

The tall priest on the poop dropped to his knees, the cross still in upraised arms. He sank down and the cross fell.

A rush of Spanish soldiers came from the cabin passageways. They had been driven out and up from 'tween decks by pirates who had surged below and swept the gundeck.

Some of the Spaniards staggered, supported by comrades; all were bleeding. They were heartened by seeing a numerous company about their captain and ran forward with excited cries, pressed into the fight so hard that the front rank of their own men, willy-nilly, was crowded on to the ladder.

The pirates had to turn from the ladder, come down, and some fell a-sprawl. Ripaudi leaped, spitting curses.

The Spanish captain followed eagerly. His men cheered and cried:

"No quarter! No quarter to pirates!"

It was a fierce rally. Ripaudi met it with ferocious agility.

Herrack ran forward with cutlass a-swing. His foot slipped on the fallen body of a man that grunted. The deck was slick with blood slime. The gunner's mate swung up the heavy gun, club-like,

and smashed down a helmeted head. Stormy outcry rang over the deck.

The whole stern now lay open to the pirates. The Spanish captain and the men about him were cut off from retreat up the ladder. They were forced into the angle of the bulwark and bulkhead beneath the quarterdeck. Death had them between his teeth.

From afar there came through the clamor the shrill screams of women.

Ripaudi sprang forward, slipped on a smear of blood, went all a-sprawl. Spanin his weary dark eyes and his long sword's point was up, skillfully.

Herrack leaped forward, struck up that heavy sword, and cried:

"Give over! You've done what man could do! Take quarter! God is my witness that—"

Ripaudi screamed as if seared by hot iron. "You—*you* offer quarter! I'm captain here! I, Ripaudi!" Ripaudi raised his sword with cat-quick sway of arm to strike Herrack.

Herrack swung back without a word,

iards lurched forward to stab him.

Herrack hewed at the nearest head, struck with circling sweep of heavy cutlass, turned aside sword points.

Sounds of fighting elsewhere on the ship had stopped. Gleeful yelping broke loose as men plundered.

Soldier after soldier was cut down at the side of the grim, gray captain, whose bright armor was dented, while blood oozed through the joints. His wounded left arm hung a-droop. Challenge burned his look fiercely pleased. His fingers tightened on the cutlass already curved to slash. The boatswain's burly back lurched before Herrack and the boatswain jerked down Ripaudi's arm.

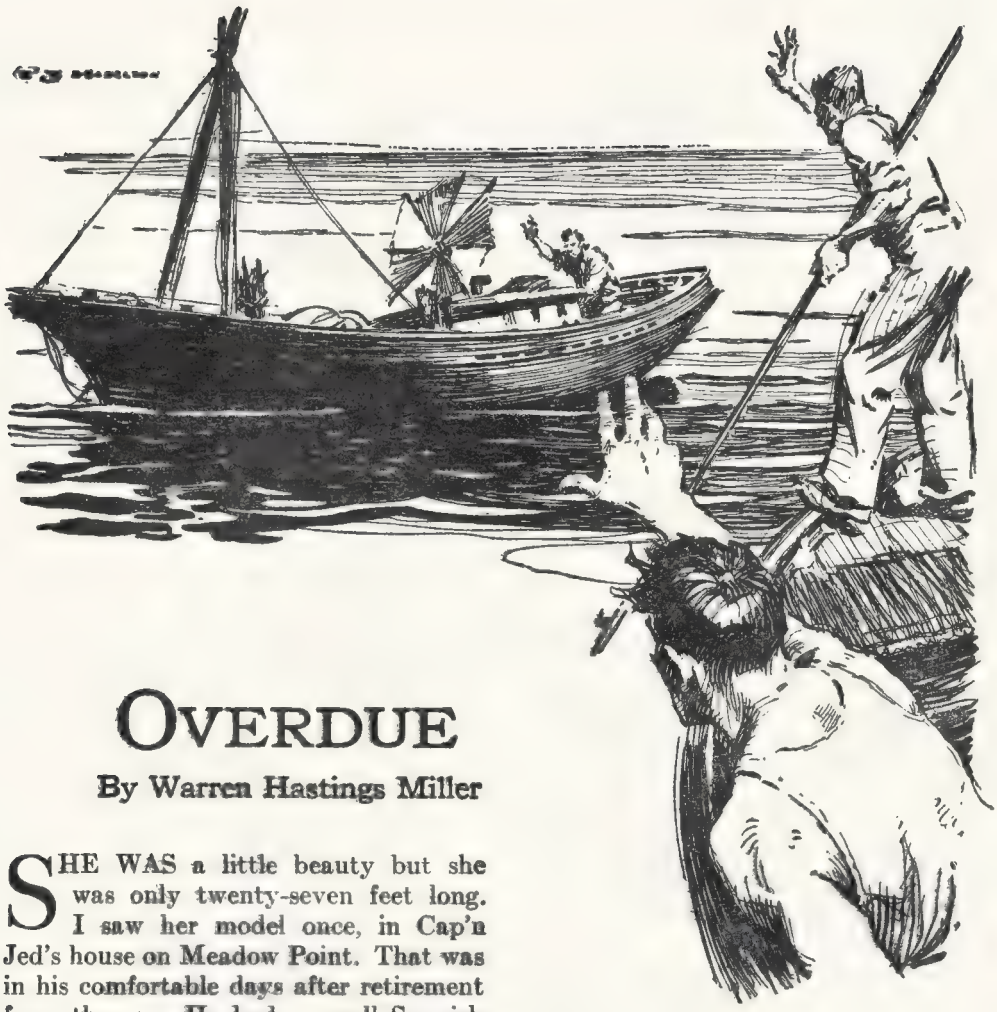
The Spanish captain spoke:

"Death—but not the shame of quarter from pirates!"

He had his death at once under the fury-driven thrust of Ripaudi's sword.

The fight was won.

(To be continued)



OVERDUE

By Warren Hastings Miller

SHE WAS a little beauty but she was only twenty-seven feet long. I saw her model once, in Cap'n Jed's house on Meadow Point. That was in his comfortable days after retirement from the sea. He had a small Spanish War pension from his naval service in '98, a piece of arable land, and that neat, tight cottage built with his own hands. The model was of sweet lines, deep, able. His favorite schooner rig, even for that small length.

"Build her some day," Cap'n Jed said with that brevity of speech characteristic of Yanks. His love for the sea was still alive. And it was concentrated in that model. The ship of his dreams, before our eyes, in miniature.

Later—several years—I came upon him building her. The depression had hit us but I still had money enough to spend my summers up there. I don't own anything, thank God—it does not pay—but you can always rent a shack of some sort. Captain Jed had her frame on the stocks by the waterside. Oak ribs and timbers. Hair-line fits, every one of them. She was being built to last.

I looked about before saying anything. The arable land was planted to the last inch in vegetables. A chicken-run of some size occupied a corner where no chicken-run had been. The house looked kept up, as always, tight, white, with green shutters, and sliding inside sashes against the ferocious New England temperatures. He had put his sea savings into it.

This combination of agricultural plenty and evident preparations for sea interested me.

"What's all this, Jed?" I said. "You're raising enough for a village this season."

He lowered the keen adze with which he had been beveling a forward rib. His lean old body seemed not to know fatigue but to rejoice in the skill of hand and eye. His eyes looked at me with some hostility, as a city man.

"Yer? Cuttin' loose from it all, I guess. They've took my house . . . Taxes."

I expressed sympathetic concern. Jed lived two miles out of town, but you know these politicians. They gave him no road, no water, no sewer, no electric light, but were prompt and rigid with the taxes.

"Couldn't your pension swing it?" I asked.

He laid a batten along the ribs before answering. It met every surface without a crack showing.

"Yer; they cut me to six dollars a month," he said. "Ye git that, if over sixty and wasn't wounded, now."

Who was wounded in the naval operations of the Spanish War? I seemed to remember, in two great battles, the miracle of two men killed and six wounded as our total casualties. But what of the long weeks of vigilance, of exposure, of those frantic orders hurrying the fleet this way and that in total disregard of human endurance? Our smug government counted that as nothing, and Jed had lost his house. He was too old to ask for a job.

"But look here," I said, "how did you get the money for all that, then?" I pointed at the nearly finished frame of his ship.

"Sawed 'em out meself."

Jed showed me a contraption that was no less than a home-made foot-power jig saw. It was contrived of a springy hickory-branch fork and a wooden table through which the saw blade passed. You have only to look about any old New England farmhouse to realize how much they did for themselves in the way of home-made gadgets. I noticed that his two big oaks were gone. Even the stumps had been utilized for natural crooks and knees.

It suddenly dawned on me that all this—the home-built ship, the big crop of vegetable truck, the chicken-run—were all part of a reasoned plan. The Yank was answering these intolerable conditions in the only way he knew; clear out and try somewhere else.

"You mean," I said, "that you're raising a supply of grub, and putting to sea, and letting them have your house and land if they want it?"

"Yep. Git some planks on her and go . . . She's got a nice hold. There's people want cargoes carried, somewhere. I'm aimin' fer Floridy. This country is gittin' less and less fit ter live in."

It was quite a long speech for Jed, but that last sentence was a gem. I was beginning to agree with it myself, after some fifty years of it.

He showed me tubs of salted fish, and eggs in water-glass. There was little about preserving food that these old-timers did not know. The ship would carry a year's supply of it, come harvest time, and Jed would sail a free man.

He did so, about September, and the town never saw him again. I learned that he had swapped his remaining equity in the homestead for planking, chandlery and canvas. She sailed out past the lighthouse, a beauty miniature schooner, sturdily rigged. Boom-and-gaff, of course. Trust Jed not to hold with any newfangled Marconi gadgets, and sails that bagged out of true unless nursed like babies.

IT WAS inevitable that I should run into him again. I was "aimin' fer Floridy" myself. It is cheaper to run down there for the winter than to stay north and shoulder fifty dollars' worth of coal bills a month. Tarpon Springs is a good place for a writer-fellow.

It is a curious little Greek town, the home port of a large fleet of gaudy white sponge boats of astonishing old-world lines. They are painted on sheer-strakes and bulwarks and deck housings in loud colors that extend their scheme even to the masts and spars. Its big wharf is inhabited by artists and their easels, by divers in their clumsy rubber suits, by swarthy and fearless-eyed men of the oldest sea-faring race.

I was working up some material on the yearly blessing of the waters by the Greek church patriarch, wherein the divers go down after a gold cross cast into the lagoon. At the end of the long line of those breath-taking white-orange-and-black sponge boats, moored bows-on to the wharf, I saw two trim, sturdily shrouded masts that looked somehow familiar. I walked past the brick Sponge Exchange toward them. Jed sat on his cuddy hatch, smoking contemplatively a reeking pipe. A man from the Exchange was grunting broken English at him. Jed was listening and saying nothing.

"Come right aboārd, Mister," he greeted me. He clipped a few words at the Greek, who shrugged, agreed, and went ashore.

There was not much above her deck but the cuddy housing and the main hatch, tarpaulin covered. A comfortable nine-inch bulwark enclosed all Jed's kingdom. Everything neat, orderly, and handy. The gear was all cleated where one man could reach it.

"How are you, Jed?" I said. "Make this port often?"

"Regular. I got a run. Here to Galveston. These Guineas are hell on fresh figs, and there's a sight of them bein' raised around Galveston. Feller there takes my sponges . . . Could be worse."

He had told me his whole history for the past six months in those few sentences allowed to escape through one corner of his mouth while the other curled up in a canny smile. I put my hand inadvertently on the Charlie Noble rising from the galley stove through the cuddy roof. I wrung it and swore.

"Gosh! I didn't know that thing was so damn hot!" I cried.

Jed removed his pipe. "Ye know it now, don't ye?" he asked drily.

"You go to hell!" I barked.

The smile flickered. "How long d'ye think they'd let me stay there?"

Dry as the remainder biscuit of a long voyage, that Yank! We went below into the cuddy, and over a bottle I gathered that he was doing well. This warm, lazy Gulf would treat his old age kindly. You could see it out beyond the lagoon, a hazy mirror under the sun, the smooth, rolling ripples of its ground-swell breaking on the mangroves with a soft crash, its sole motion. But trust it, never. There were always those fierce northers that turn it without warning into a cold, angry cave of the winds, with steep, laboring seas that are mountains, capped with deluge-bearing crests, to any small craft.

"She's been good to me," Jed said. "Able little craft as ye ever held the wheel of. Jogs along nice as nice, with foresail 'n' stays'l sheeted home, an' me below sleepin' with the helm lashed."

"What do you do about northers?" I asked skeptically.

"I don't git up anchor," Jed said.

He could smell weather, at his age, better than our elaborate system of forecasts, I concluded. It was easy to see that he loved her. She had brought him péace in the losing struggle to keep alive and pay taxes that besets us all. He had not asked anybody for freight to carry in her hold. A sponge in these curio shops that front the wharf commands only five cents in Tarpon Springs and over twenty-five anywhere else in these benighted United States. In Galveston, for example . . . He bought them for much less right off the sponge boats. A similar dicker with the growers of fresh

figs, right off the tree, had enabled Jed to supply a demand both ways.

Remained the sea, which has betrayed able ships and experienced seamen since the first galley put out her prow from Phoenician shores. And always will. That track of his, in a straight line across the steady northeast wind, seven hundred miles to Galveston . . . I was worried about it. There were always northers.

"She rides nice," Jed said. "Heave to with stays'l and a rag of fores'l set, and there ye are. Go below and sleep it out. Ye ain't no use on deck."

"Any leaks?" I asked.

"She's sprung some the last one," Jed admitted. "But I'm gainin' on it."

He smiled and showed me an invention that was a small windmill of about four foot spread. It had triangular sails to its four arms, and a crank, bent up out of quarter-inch round iron. You mounted the thing on a post that could be shipped on the cuddy roof, and a rod reached down to the pump handle.

"Hain't pumped her since I made it," Jed said proudly.

"Lazy man's job," I laughed, but could not but admire the Yankee ingenuity that made the elements do his work for him. However, there was the leak. "Better haul her out when you get time," I said.

"I will that," he promised. "Next v'yage. Or mebbe the next after that. Them figs won't wait. Gotta look me another cargo soon."

HE BECAME overdue some time that March. We on shore shivered at our typewriters during that norther, and complained of the sparseness of fresh vegetables, frost-killed; but they on the sea had heroic times of it. The sponge boats came in dismasted and abused, with missing divers and men washed overboard. The Greek colony hung black crape over its numerous shop doors. And Jed did not appear. Nor a week later, when all was warm and sunny again. I wired the harbor-master in Galveston then, and learned that Jed had left port before the norther. For once his weather nose had failed him. Or perhaps he knew, but wanted to get back with the last of the figs.

We took counsel together, my writer friend and I. He is an English-looking man from up Maine way, Hod Sheridan. Robust and a good seaman, his brick house in Inness Park on one of the lagoons has a wharf running out from the lawn with canoes and a small sailboat moored to it. Anchored out further is his stout motor-cruiser.

We scanned the charts. "He might have put in at one of those Louisiana bayous," I said. "He skirts that coast for three hundred miles from Galveston."

Hod tugged at his peaky mustache. "Figuring from the time he left, not a hope," he said. "Jed got well beyond the mouth of the Mississippi before that norther struck, I make it."

Mobile got the worst of that storm. We pricked a point on Jed's track south of it as where he probably ran into trouble. From there his drift would be southeasterly for about two hundred miles before that norther blew out. We marked a cross on that line and set out in the power cruiser over a sea that was warm and placid and lovely, with only that smooth ripple of the ground-swell to prevent it becoming a flat mirror. And friendly? Oh, no! The sea is never friendly. There is deceit and duplicity in its most tender mood. And in any mood it can always drown . . . We were seamen enough never to trust it.

Arrived at our mark, the round horizon showed exactly nothing. An empty sea, hot, lazy and calm. Then came a fresh breeze out of the southwest that added a silvery mist in the splendor of light and made it all seem indeed lovable, a loafer's glory for yachtsmen and

seamen alike. But it was just as cruel and treacherous to the initiated.

We decided to keep on searching southeast. Since none of the Key West-Galveston vessels had sighted him, he must have drifted across their track. We spoke, in about an hour's chugging, a small Honduran tramp coming up from the Yucatan Channel and bound for Tampa with bananas. He stopped when we flew the international code yellow with a black dot in it which means, "Man overboard." There was some damning betwixt the bridges as Hod explained that we had lost no one; but had they seen a derelict anywhere? Small craft flying distress signals?

It was one of the coincidences of the sea that they had.

"He gettin' on all right! Smoke pipe. No want tow," said the swarthy captain of the Honduran. He made circular gestures with his arms, flailing large sections of atmosphere. "How you call him?"

"Windmill?" I said and we both laughed. Jed had set his contraption. It pumped the ship for him while, single-handed, he was probably rigging a sheers to pull out his mast stumps, if they had gone by the board. It would be beneath his dignity to accept a tow from the Guinea unless in a bad way indeed.

Much relieved, we set out on their back course. We joked and were happy, and told anecdotes of the unconquerable Jed. Even the sea could not beat a Yank!

She came in sight a long distance off on the horizon to the southwest. A black speck in the mild haze, with only those smooth windrows furrowing the sea between us and the derelict. No masts showed. Our faces fell and became concerned as we chugged nearer. She was undoubtedly down by the head.

The windmill developed as visibility increased. Its white sails turned interminably, lazily, atop the cuddy roof. A stump of foremast, with a sheers made of his main boom and gaff, gave her the appearance of some Oriental dhow. Later Jed became distinct through our glasses. He had abandoned work on the tackle and was helping the windmill with a hand pump. I could see his arm going up and down slantwise, up and down. He seemed fixed immovably aft of his own cuddy hatch in that mechanical toil.

"That's bad," said Hod. "We can't tow her. Just about gas enough left to take him aboard and get back to Tarpon."

I could not imagine Jed leaving his ship. She was his home, his livelihood, his all. There was naught but the poorhouse for old dogs like him on land.

He spared a wave to us as we neared but went right on pumping. We jumped aboard as soon as fast alongside and I took the pump handle away from him in mid-stroke.

"Here, let me do that," I said. "You sit down." He must be tired.

Jed picked up his pipe and sucked at it, unlit. "Turnbuckle carried away; port main shroud," he said succinctly through the teeth clenched on the stem. "Ought to hev known better'n to trust them things," he added with disdain for all modern improvements in rigging.

The story of his shipwreck was in those few words. I could envisage that shroud turnbuckle snapping in the stress of the gale, its mate going with the added strain on it, then the mast and foremast in turn. All that gear, with its wire ropes and splintered spars and soggy canvas, hung overside now. He'd have come through with the old-fashioned dead-eyes and lanyards with which he had put out to sea from his farm. They may not be as convenient as turnbuckles, and require a deal of looking after, but they do not part in a gale . . .

Hod shook his head after some study through the cuddy hatch of conditions

below. "I'll take that a while," he said and reached to relieve me of the pump handle. "Take a look yourself," he whispered in my ear.

I was tired already. Water gushed from the pump spout around our feet, water spewed up on deck in pulsations from the windmill attachment, but it did not seem to make any difference down there. A transparency of clean sea-water filled a pool between the berth side and the galley lockers down there in the cabin. I do not like clean water in a ship. It means a heavy leak, one hard to gain on.

"Any idea where it is, Jed?" I asked him.

"Yep. Forefoot's sprung. She took an almighty heave when them masts went. I been down there with putty. 'Tain't no use. Ye could throw a dog through them cracks."

A ship-yard job, that sprung forefoot. Even then doubtful. Every plank is loosened where it joins the stem. They open the more the longer she keeps the sea.

But we were confident. We smiled and got over into the dink with handfuls of putty. Plaster her all over with it, if necessary, we told ourselves. Sure we'd stop those cracks! Jed resumed pumping. He knew better than we.

Putty stuck diabolically to our fingers as we thrust arms, heads, and shoulders deep into the waters around that forefoot. Putty squirmed in worms off the planking and sank writhing into the depths. Putty rolled out of wet cracks, preferring our fingers. We were breathless, choked, half drowned. We ended by dislodging some good work that Jed had done.

"Couldn't ye tow me a little?" Jed asked wistfully from the pump.

"Where to?" Hod devastated him with the uselessness of that. She was sinking too fast to get anywhere. Besides, we were still undefeated. We got out some caulking cotton and tried to do impossibilities with it. Hammer and caulking chisel are surprisingly ineffective down in three feet of water. We tried tacking on a canvas patch, next. It looked nice when we finally got it on. What it stopped in the way of leaks you may not ask me. But it finished the last of our energies.

Panting and worn, we went aboard Jed's ship. A glance below showed that ominous pool now up to the berth level. Jed was still pumping. Fatigue seemed to have dulled his Yankee inventiveness, for he had no further ideas to offer. There weren't any. We might tow and speak a ship in maybe a day's time —out of gas ourselves. And this leak was a matter of hours . . .

"We'll have to tell him to abandon ship," Hod whispered in my ear.

I could not do it. Jed loved her with the clinging intensity of the old. She was all he had, his bulwark against the buffets of life, his home. To abandon her to the remorseless sea, that had broken her in fury, and now, in a smiling and glorious calm, was treacherously sapping that buoyancy which was her life . . .

Jed read our thoughts. "Go on, boys," he said. "Ye've done the best ye kin for me." Those words came through the unending thrust and pull of his arm. Tired words, discouraged. He made a last effort to evolve an idea.

"Ye might lash your cruiser alongside," he said. "Sometimes it helps keep them afloat."

We knew it was no good, but we did it. Hawsers locked our capstan to his capstan, stern-post to stern-post. I cursed, illogically, that smiling sea. It *might* send us a stiff breeze to speed up that windmill! But it didn't—and if it had there would be a chop that would grind both boats. You can't beat the sea.

But it hadn't beaten Jed—not yet. A splash overside sent me jumping aboard to help. He had cudgeled up an-

other idea and was now heaving out his inside ballast. Pig iron in forty-pound billets from under his cabin floor. I made the chain overside from his up-reaching hands. Might help; but there was that thousand-pound iron keel . . .

Hod had started up and was heading northeast. It at least looked like doing something against the inevitable. We had by now a pronounced list. The hawsers were creaking. Jed's ship was slowly taking us over—or rather it was that heartless sea, always ready for a drowning, that was doing it. We would soon have to cut.

Jed came on deck and wiped his rusty arms.

"Got the last pig out of her anyway," he said.

Then he saw our list. All that work for nothing . . . For some time he studied the hawsers, trying desperately to think up something further to be done. Then he said: "Cast off, boys, and leave me be. 'T ain't no use."

Obviously it wasn't going to work, and we felt that the time had come. Hod nodded and we slacked off together, gingerly. Our cruiser righted herself, Jed's ship lurched drunkenly with the huge mass of rolling water inside her. Jed staggered and eyed us forlornly. She was sick unto death, that stout little craft. We all felt as if some beloved woman was passing.

"Better come aboard us, Jed," I said gently.

He shook his head and then shot me a wry grin. "She ain't sunk yit," he said indomitably and fell to pumping once more. No; he could not leave her! So long as there was a flutter of life left, her man must stay by her.

"Can you beat him?" Hod muttered. "Here, help me unship this thing."

We had a power bilge-pump that would do the trick if we only could connect it, but we also had a large emergency hand-pump built into the cabin woodwork. With fierce energy we attacked its painted fastenings with screw-driver and pry-bar. Presently it was reaching down into Jed's hold, and both of us were tugging at its handle. A three-inch solid stream fell on deck between our feet.

Fine; but there is a lot of water in the Gulf of Mexico, and it soon tired us. I looked aft, worried over Jed, who had been at it for hours on end. He was changing hands rather frequently. Only his unconquerable will kept him at it. And the hope that, by some miracle, a ship of real tonnage might come over the horizon and sling him in a hawser cradle alongside, and there you were, the sea at last baffled of its prey.

ON THAT glimmer of hope we labored, toiled, knew the black depths of fatigue, forgot all else but the one chimera of keeping Jed's home afloat for him.

We pumped. In an hour of it our arms racked with shooting pains—it gets you in the shoulder particularly—and our knees wabbled. I, for one, thought that there was a hell of a lot of water in the Gulf of Mexico; but we seemed holding our own. The top tier of fig crates, down there in the hold, remained an inch or so above water.

Jed, aft, pumped slowly, mechanically, not wasting an ounce of energy in any lost motion. He knew what to do; keep her up till something big arrived. There was not a captain in the Gulf but would cradle him alongside and ease him slowly into Tampa. Hod seemed obsessed by the notion. He was spitting cotton, but he changed hands enthusiastically and said:

"By God, we'll go down with this little hooker sooner than make him leave her! There's nothing to it, really. We're right in the track of the banana boats."

I looked at the empty horizon in the direction of the Yucatan Channel, but there was no smoke down there. Also

the sea level overside seemed much nearer now than it had been. We were far down by the head.

Hod noticed it, too. He dropped the pump handle with a curse and peered down under the fore deck.

"It's no use," he said. "Look there!"

I looked. Luminous cracks showed in all the planking running to the stem. She had been simply shifting her water forward while we thought we were gaining on it. And, the more cracks submerged, the more Gulf she took in . . . The story was now clear. Jed had kept her up nicely with his windmill till she got away from him and began putting them under. . . .

The time was come to take him off—by force if necessary. We agreed to that in whispers and went aft. I noticed that the water in the cabin was now over the galley stove-lids. That warm, glowing heart of the ship was drowned, gone out, forever. I wondered how it would be with Jed's old heart if we did not get him away from this pretty quick.

He scarcely looked up at us. His eyes were bloodshot, strained, seemed glued immovably to the pump bell in that fixed idea of pumping her till he dropped.

"It's no use, Jed," I said. "She's 'way down by the head, and making water fast."

He stopped pumping, then. I noticed that the old arm leaning on the rail shook unceasingly with fatigue. The pump hand rested for a moment on his knee.

"That so?" he said quietly. "Well, she ain't under yit."

His lips set in a tight line and he reached again for the pump handle. And then without a sound he collapsed sidewise on deck . . .

Hod caught him up, but we were warned. There was significance in that galley stove gone out . . . Jed's heart had gone out, too.

His ship was not long in following him into that great beyond where, I firmly believe, good and sweet ships meet again their captains. God is great; He also is a sailor, or He would not have made so many of them. And He knows what sailors want . . . We carried Jed's body aboard and cast off. At some distance we stopped the motor and waited. Those smooth windrows of the sea passed under and tossed lightly our buoyant boat, to roll on and break hungrily around her logy and sinking sister. A black and unnatural-looking profile for a ship, with her bows nearly under and her stern high like a junk, hovered before our eyes for a time. It was surrounded to the far horizon by those silky undulations, soft, smooth, caressing. Then they broke suddenly all over her like a spouting reef and Hod ejaculated the one solemn word:

"Gone!"

"Jed's well out of it all, I'll say," I said with bitter eyes on that empty horizon, whence no help had come.

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Saddle For Sale

By S. Omar Barker

A HORSE an' a saddle, a rope an' a gun;
A tarp at the wagon when day ridin's done;
The sweet chill of starlight at guard-changin' call;
A song for the bedground, a steer's organ bawl;
A dawn-shadowed mesa, the cook's breakfast hail—
Who knows sweeter living than life on the trail?

A flood-swollen river, a scared herd to cross;
No danger but drownin'—or hell from the boss.
Your top pony sanded, a lump in your throat;
Go saddle another—the wagon's to float!
Your boots seepin' water; your gizzard plumb pale;
You've done swum a river! Ho! Life on the trail!

A waterhole sun-baked; a sixty-mile drive;
Gaunt, thirst maddened cattle to get there alive.
Your own gullet shriveled; your horse fit to drop;
The water keg empty an' nowheres to stop.
Black thunderheads westward, the wind a parched gale—
But it ain't no use wishin' for rain on the trail.

Night thunder, blue lightning; the stampeded herd
Takes three days to gather—you don't say a word.
A trail-cuttin' ruckus, your gun bangs a few;
Your arm totes a bullet that didn't bore through.
The cook's a rough doctor, his probe a horse-nail,
An' you've got you a keepsake of life on the trail.

Bean juice in your whiskers; your makin's all gone,
But you're bound for Wyoming, the herd must roll on!
There's a store an' saloon thirty miles off the way:
"We're late with the herd, boys! Ain't no time to play!"
The boss lends you smokin' that's sifty an' stale;
For a nickel you'd shoot him an' quit the damn trail!

It's up in the saddle, Wyoming or bust,
A-spittin' pure 'dobe from breathin' trail dust!
It's follerin' steer tails an' chousin' 'em on;
It's breakfast by starlight, an' ridin' by dawn.
You kick an' you cuss, an' your saddle's for sale—
But you don't never sell it—you're ridin' the trail!

RUNT FROM THE EAST

by Howard Marsh

BUCK FORENSEE, major-domo of the Duckfoot ranch, halted his fence-riders in the darkness and issued final instructions.

"Leave your ponies here," he said in that startling voice of his, startling because his two hundred forty-odd pounds of bull-like bulk emitted a thin, quavering tenor. "String out fifty rods apart, right across the opening of Jaw-Bone Cañon. When Art Erkus comes through, let him have it. Don't take no chances with that crook. Shootin's cleaner than hangin' anyway. The law's on our side. Erkus has run more'n a hundred head of steers and yearlings through the gap. If he comes back tonight, murder him!"

"What 'bout shootin' each other 'cause we can't see?" demanded Perks Perkins, who had no desire to be mistaken for Art Erkus.

"Erkus will be on a horse and you boys—"

Faint noise of motion vibrated the darkness toward the gap. Buck Forensee froze, his mouth half-open under the canopy of spread-eagle mustache. The fence-riders became taut, their ears straining, their hands feeling for the comfort of gun handles.

In the near foothills a coyote barked; his cry quavered into silence after shattering the night to bits. The stillness was more brittle now, harder to endure. Sandy MacDonald, the boy of the outfit, laughed nervously. "Just a steer tangled in creosote—"

Buck Forensee whirled on Sandy and

the lad was silent. Every other man in the outfit knew by now that the sound from the darkness was the slow, cautious padding of a horse's hoofs. A stone clinked metallically.

"Lone rider," breathed Ramon Chico, whose Mexican ears were keenest. "Coming down the pass— He's stopped— He's coming again."

"Circle him!" whispered Buck Forensee, pulling his gun. "I'll grab him first."

Hoofs rasped in sand again with that curious slick-slack, much closer now. The Duckfoot fence-riders slid silently in the black creosote and encelia.

"Got you, Erkus! Hands up!" Buck Forensee's tenor was unusually clear in the night.

There was no answer. The beat of hoofs ceased. The fence-riders waited breathlessly in the brush. They sensed Buck Forensee move forward; heard the impact of his heavy fist, then his quick call: "Light a fire! Can't see a thing!"

Young Sandy MacDonald, his teeth chattering, found some dead creosote bush, heaped it high and touched a match to it. Perks Perkins and Ramon Chico moved to help him, adding the resinous fuel to the fire. The orange flames leaped high, lighting the desert floor. The other fence riders moved to Buck Forensee who was leaning over something on the ground. Behind him a horse was silhouetted against the night. While the fence-riders watched the exhausted animal slowly, almost gracefully buckled its legs and sank to the sand.

"Erkus?" demanded Perks Perkins, his voice rasping with anger.

"No!" grunted Buck Forensee. "God knows what it is." He lifted the figure in his arms, carried it close to the fire, laid it down again. Then the men saw.

The fellow was a bag of skin and bones, topped with a flaming crown of red hair. He was young but his face was sunken and bone-showing like that of an old man, and each individual freckle stood out. While they watched him his blue eyes opened and he forced a grin. "Who hit me with a brick?" he demanded. "Some guy threw Irish confetti."

"God bless my Aunt Susan!" muttered Buck Forensee. "Just a kid. I hit him hard enough to break his jaw."

The fellow on the ground shook his head as if to clear it, slowly forced himself to his feet. "I ain't got any glass jaw," he said. "I can stand toe-to-toe with any lightweight in the game. Sure I can." He squared off, leading with his left. There was something definitely professional in his stance, the way his head nudged behind his shoulder, the position of his right arm, fist turned upward. "Ask any of the guys around Madison Square Garden whether I got a glass jaw. Ask them who beat The Cuban Kid, who flattened out Abe Moreno, who took the crown away from—"

The kid, standing there in the orange firelight which gleamed from his red hair and flashing eyes, began to sway on his feet. Further and further his shoulders moved. "I can take it," he gasped. "I ain't so good as once I was but I can take it. Nobody ever licked Spindle Kelly yet and nobody ever—"

His body swayed too far now and he pitched forward, face downward in the sand. He began to cough and his scrawny body writhed convulsively. The coughing ceased; the fellow was motionless, silent.

Buck Forensee moved forward with surprising agility for one of his huge bulk; he picked the scrawny figure up in his arms as if it were a child.

"He's passed out," he said. "I'm taking him back to the ranch. Sandy, find my pony."

"But what about Art Erkus?" demanded Ramon Chico, bloodthirsty as always.

"To hell with Art Erkus!" burred Buck Forensee. "This here kid is dead game. He ain't goin' to pass out if I can help it."

The cavalcade of Duckfoot fence-rid-

ers pounded through the night toward the ranch house. At their head was big Buck Forensee, carrying in his arms the sack of skin and bones once known as Spindle Kelly, lightweight champion. Far up in Jaw-Bone Cañon, Art Erkus, warned by the orange light of the desert fire, had turned back. He could round up a few of the Duckfoot yearlings some other night just as well.

THREE different verdicts were passed on Spindle Kelly in the bunkhouse next morning:

"He's just a bum," declared Perks Perkins, who was hard and sun-dried and old. "Not worth two bits. Not worth nothin'. Buck was a damn' fool to pass up hangin' Art Erkus for that Eastern bum."

"Skin and bones," explained Buck Forensee. "Porous plaster lungs, a cauliflower ear and nose punched clean into his face. Sent out to the desert to die by some doc 'cause he's got t.b. But he's still Spindle Kelly, that's what, and he's game as they make 'em and he's got the straightest-shootin' blue eyes you ever saw. Aw, hell, he's a game kid and I'd like to help him pull through."

"Red-hair boy velly sick," intoned Wong Tong, the Chinese cook. "He die in two month."

"You lie by the clock!" shrilled Buck Forensee.

"Two month," repeated Wong Tong with a slow, calm finality, then retreated from Buck Forensee's bull-like charge.

"Wong Tong's always right about such things," Perks Perkins announced. "And while Buck is playin' wet nurse to that Eastern runt Art Erkus will clean up on the Duckfoot herd."

At first the Duckfoot fence-riders were inclined to agree with Perks Perkins that the Eastern runt was a nuisance. Gradually they changed their perspective. Spindle Kelly was a jaunty, courageous little fellow, even when he could barely talk from weakness. Full of wisecracks, he was, and always with that twisted grin on his freckled face. It got to be a game, this watching the Eastern runt gain strength, and the Duckfoot boys, admiring pure courage, pulled for the kid. The day he started on his first horseback ride alone every man in the bunkhouse knew it and was secretly pleased. No man dreamed the consequences of that ride.

Spindle reached the southwest range line before exhaustion overcame him. He stake-tied his horse in the creosote and threw himself in the sand at the edge of a barranca so the sun could perform its healing wonders.

He awoke with the acrid smoke of creosote in his nostrils. Startled, he leaped to his feet but instantly fell back. Below him in the barranca a stodgy man stooped over a fire. At his feet was a spotted yearling, front feet tied, head limply back, body swelling in dumb terror. Beyond was the man's horse, keeping the rope taut on the young steer.

Art Erkus! Too often had Spindle Kelly heard the Duckfoot riders curse and describe the squat, muscular rustler not to recognize him instantly. Here he was at his nefarious work. "Catch him at it!"—that had been the cry of the Duckfoot riders. But if Spindle Kelly went back to the bunkhouse for aid the fellow would be gone.

Spindle Kelly slid to the barranca's edge, planning his attack. The rustler's gun was on a rock beside him, ready for action. In his right hand he held a branding iron, just withdrawn from the fire. While Spindle watched he placed it on the yearling's shoulder and grinned his satisfaction as the animal struggled wildly, now bearing the Erkus diamond-arrow brand.

The thin body of Spindle Kelly hurtled fifteen feet downward. With one kick he sent the Luger automatic spinning from under the hand of Erkus, into the fire. Spindle danced forward. His fists shot to the hirsute-matted jaw of

Art Erkus. The rustler staggered backward, straightened.

He charged with flailing arms and Spindle Kelly met him halfway.

Twelve thousand wild fight fans saw Spindle Kelly meet Tony Ruggo for the championship in Madison Square Garden two years ago; no one saw the shadow of Spindle Kelly fight for his life with Art Erkus in that lonely desert barranca. Yet Spindle's last fight was the greatest of his career. He went into it with the same twisted grin that Ruggo couldn't knock from his lips even when Spindle's nose was flattened, his mouth spewing blood, one eye shut and the other half-blind from a cut flap of flesh. Against Ruggo, Spindle Kelly was beaten a dozen times but in the tenth round he floored his opponent for the count and the fans went crazy. "Spindle has the fighting heart," they shouted as they pounded each other on the back. "You can't beat a guy with a fighting heart like Spindle's!"

The shadow of Spindle Kelly needed this fighting heart in his desperate battle with Art Erkus. He hadn't a chance, not the ghost of a chance. Outweighed by sixty pounds, his thin, wasted form was opposed to a huge, desert-hardened man, a healthy man of solid bone and sound sinew. No, Spindle Kelly hadn't a chance,—except for that smile on his lips and the courage in his heart.

Thud, smack, crack! The never-to-be-forgotten crunch of bare fists on bare flesh, the thud as a thin body hit the sand and bounded up again, the gasp of laboring lungs, half-choked cries of pain. The muscular arms of Art Erkus cut arcs in the sun's glare, his hamlike hands pelted at Spindle's head. Once he stooped to seize a rock but Spindle was on him too quickly and beat him upright again. Art Erkus bellowed with pain and charged head down, carrying Spindle backward to the ground in an irresistible rush. His fists pounded at the thin, freckled face.

SINCE noon Buck Forensee, had been worrying over the disappearance of Spindle Kelly. "The damn' kid's prob'ly curled up somewhere in the sun," he announced, but he watched the range, hoping to see the cloud of alkali dust indicating Spindle's return. His worry increased. So many things could happen to Spindle: Utter exhaustion or losing his way or falling from his horse. But, "Sure, he's just curled up in the sun," Buck reassured himself.

Spindle Kelly was curled up in the sun but not in the manner in which Buck Forensee imagined him. Buck found him finally. Late in the afternoon he could stand the suspense no longer and sneaked away on his pony. The two jiggled southwestward. So arrow-true was their line, even before they picked up Spindle's tracks, that it seemed a directing hand must be guiding them.

Buck Forensee pulled up at the barranca's edge. For a moment he stared into the distance, unconscious of the drama at his feet. Then his eye caught motion below him and he roared a curse.

Two figures were lying on the sun-bleached sand below him, two figures warped and entwined grotesquely. Beneath was the stocky form of Art Erkus; flung limply across it was the skinny bunch of bones called Spindle Kelly. Even while Buck watched, the head of Erkus moved and his body heaved. In that same split second the pipe-stem arm of Spindle Kelly shot forward and his fist tunked on the point of the rustler's jaw. Erkus subsided again.

Buck Forensee, as he slid down the side of the barranca, vaguely pictured that terrific struggle in the dry-wash, pictured it from the scuffed sand, the crushed creosote, the blood-stained rocks; vaguely he realized that the kid must have perched across the body of Erkus for hours, rousing when that bulk under him quivered to life and silencing

it by another of those desperate blows to the jaw.

"The poor damn' kid," breathed Buck Forensee. "No one ever beat him yet!"

He lifted Spindle Kelly and examined him as one would examine a doll before purchase. He would not have recognized the face, a bloody and pulpy mass almost without features, but he would never forget that twisted smile which flickered across the swollen, raw lips. The smile waned as Spindle, his work done, allowed himself to sink into the comfort of unconsciousness.

Afterward, Buck Forensee was sorry that he didn't kill Erkus on the spot. But Spindle Kelly needed attention and after that bloody duty was done Buck had no heart left to butcher Art Erkus. As an afterthought, he thrust the branding iron into the fire and pried over the stodgy body of Erkus until it was lying back upward. He took the iron from the fire, grinned in unholy glee and plastered it squarely on the seat of Erkus' pants. He held the smoking iron plenty long enough to leave the diamond-arrow brand forever on Art Erkus.

The sudden pain brought consciousness to Erkus. He saw Buck Forensee standing over him and crawled frantically away, stopping now and then to feel of his branded rump.

That night at the bunkhouse Wong Tong sneaked up beside the bunk of Spindle Kelly, who was still unconsicous despite the frantic ministrations of Buck Forensee.

"He not die now," intoned the Oriental. "He live one month more, jus' like I say."

It was war to the death now. It was shoot-on-sight now. The Duckfoot outfit knew it. Art Erkus had announced the fact publicly. The first time he saw Buck Forensee one or the other would die. Or it might be worse than that. Some day a clump of creosote would spit a blue puff of smoke and the desert air would vibrate to the clack of a shot and the thump of Buck Forensee's thick body as it hit the ground. Erkus was perfectly capable of shooting from ambuscade; knowing it, one or another of the Duckfoot boys always managed to accompany Buck Forensee as a bodyguard.

Lately it was Spindle Kelly who was most often the major-domo's companion. Spindle had regained his strength with surprising rapidity. His system seemed attuned to bruising fights, to rebound with unexpected vigor from a beating which would have killed a stronger man. In a month he made his first long excursion with his adored boss.

Buck Forensee had planned a celebration this day, his own secret little jubilation. In his pack he put an extra can of tomatoes, a bar of stale sweet chocolate, some tailor-made cigarettes, a pint of precious brandy. Out on the desert he and Spindle Kelly would have their fiesta, a celebration based on the error of Wong Tong. For it was two months to a day since Spindle Kelly had arrived and Spindle was not dead; he seemed healthier and stronger hour by hour. The little red-head would enjoy the view from Pulpit Butte, enjoy the water which came from the spring at its base—provided of course the water was properly flavored with brandy.

The celebration was quite a success. Spindle didn't know just what it was about but he enjoyed the extra rations, the smart jolt of brandy.

"Quite a sight from the top of Pulpit," Buck Forensee declared, throwing his big bulk on the sand after the repast. "You can see clean over the Chocolates and there is likely a mirage on Tosso Dry Lake. Me, sometimes, when I get lonely and sentimental I come over here and climb that rock. It makes a man feel awful small some way, but it makes him feel good, too."

Buck's words trailed off; he would recommend that some one else climb that rock today but he would enjoy a

siesta. He roused himself once more. "Don't go climbin' too hard and too high, Spindle," he said. "Remember you ain't real strong yet." Then he relapsed into sleep.

Pulpit Butte was less difficult to climb than Spindle Kelly had imagined. In five minutes he was up a hundred feet. A low ledge there, slightly concave, just fitted his body. A nice place to rest; the rock bed was cooler than the sand below. He stared for a long moment at the china-blue sky of the desert, watched a buzzard wheeling against it. Then he drowsed.

That strange sixth sense of mankind warned him of some stranger's approach. He sat up quickly, rubbed his eyes. Down below Buck Forensee was still puffing stertorously in sleep. Spindle grinned affectionately at the huge bulk.

Motion caught his eye. Around the end of Pulpit Butte slithered a man, his body pressed close to the rock, his right arm extended. He moved rapidly, silently, and now was directly beneath Spindle's ledge.

Art Erkus. No doubt of it. Even while Spindle watched, the trigger finfier of the rustler was tightening. He would pump bullets into that huge body of Buck Forensee, murder in cold blood the defenseless man. The air was heavy with death. One second, two seconds and it would be over. Paralyzed with horror, Spindle Kelly expected with each heart beat to hear the fatal clack-clack-clack of Erkus' gun.

Perhaps Art Erkus paused to gloat over his defenseless victim. If so, it was fatal. The quick brain of Spindle Kelly was functioning again. To cry out would be fatal to Buck. He sought a rock to hurl on the man below but the ledge was smooth and bare. The figure of Erkus stiffened again until body, extended arm and gun all seemed a piece of statuary but statuary about to spit death.

Spindle Kelly didn't hesitate. Just as he had thrown himself down the barranca a month before, now he leaped from that rock ledge. His thin body cut a black arc in the desert air. Down, down, it went, straight as a plummet, down a hundred feet.

He landed on the head of Art Erkus in that split second before the first death-laden bullet spit from the gun. The shot went wild. Erkus crumpled under the weight which had dropped from the sky. The echo of the one shot shattered the desert silence.

Buck Forensee lumbered to his feet. It was several moments before he fully perceived what had happened. Spindle Kelly and Art Erkus once more were wrapped grotesquely in each other's arms on the desert's sand, but this time both were dead.

Buck slumped against the wall of Pulpit Butte. "He done it to save me," he choked. "The blessed damn' kid!"

THE heaped mound of earth under the single acacia tree east of the bunkhouse would some day seem very lonely and forlorn, but that next morning the presence of many men drove back the spectre of emptiness. Steve MacIver had his hand on the shoulder of young Sandy MacDonald, who was choking back his sobs. Steve only stared far across the desert with those squint-hidden eyes of his. Ramon Chico, sombrero in hand, was muttering some prayer in his own tongue. Perks Perkins, the man from whom the desert sun had sucked all human pity, was twitching around the mouth and once or twice his hand rose to his throat. Wong Tong squatted in the sand, his face immobile, his eyes dull.

Buck Forensee, taut of face, seemed at the moment surest of himself. "Boys, we can't give this blessed, game Spindle Kelly no service but I thought I'd like to give him a song, mebbe. I don't know many songs. 'The Cowboy's Lament' ain't no good here and of course 'The Chisholm Trail' is out. So I just sort of fastened on 'The Maverick'."

He cleared his throat; his thin tenor, surprisingly clear and true, sounded:

" 'Only an ornery maverick from off
the Eastern range,
Sufferin' some from spavin and
mighty bad with mange,
And his fightin' heart
Was the healthiest part
Of that maverick from the Eastern
range.
Now that maverick—' "

Buck Forensee choked up suddenly. He turned and strode out into the creosote and encelia. The fence-riders didn't stare after him; they didn't want to see him.

"Anyway, we don't have to worry about Art Erkus no more," announced Perks Perkins, merely to say something.

"Two month, like I say," intoned Wong Tong.

"Shut up!" ordered Steve MacIver. All were silent. From the creosote sounded the thin tenor once more:

" 'And many men cried
As he crossed the Divide,
That maverick from the Eastern
range.' "

How Joe Cooked the Steak

"SPEAKIN' of speed," remarked Joe, "reminds me of the time I got lost for two days without anything to eat. Finally I comes on a herd of buffalo. I shoots a good fat cow and cuts off a piece of tenderloin.

"Well, I couldn't find no regular fuel, there ain't bein' a stick of timber, not a twig in sight. Finally I calkilated I'd try prairie grass, which was long and dry. I gathers up a big pile, puts the hunk of meat on my ramrod, holds its over the grass and lights a match. Jest one flash and the fire's all gone, except the wind comes up all at once and set the dang prairie on fire.

"Well, sir, bein' hungry and no raw meat eater, I takes after that fire, holdin' my meat over the blaze. It would burn purty regular for a while; then all of a sudden it would give a jump and tear across the plain like hell. Say, I chased that prairie fire about three hours, I reckon, but I finally got my meat cooked. I et it—and it shore did taste good, too—and started back across the burnt country to where I had shot the buffalo. Damn me, if I hadn't run so far in three hours that it took me two days to get back."

From "Tall Tales from Texas Cow Camps" by Mody C. Boatright.

THE CAMP-FIRE

where readers,
writers, and adventurers
meet

THE following letters will interest you. They were all addressed to me, and they concern a humorous homespun sort of poem that appeared in Camp-Fire.

Bayside, Halifax Co.
Halifax, N. S., Canada.

In reply to your letter of June 10, regarding my poem, you may use it in any manner you see fit. Will you advise me what issue of *Adventure* it will appear in, as I have a wish to see how my effort will appear in print. If it is possible would you withhold my name and just use initials as the gang here would razz me to death if they saw it? Would you also advise me if my sale of the poem to you prevents me from offering it to any other publication?

Yours truly,
JAMES EDGAR.

Portland, Oregon.

It must have its bad moments, this editorial job, with a world full of people sending in offerings they didn't invent themselves.

The little poem "I Wish't I Was One to Lie," in this September first issue has omitted, I think, one of the details in Wallace Irwin's poem printed under a title I cannot recall some twenty years ago. There was something about the meat being blown out of the stew, later blown back. Other details are reproduced faithfully enough, however, especially the fire from the galley stove. The climax, with whiskers blown right back onto the Old Man's chin, is identical.

All this is bound to put suspicion into the editor's mind. The one who suffers most, though, is the fellow who writes. Something that he honestly and painstakingly invented is suspected of not being original. Then the facts, the verities, the atmosphere that he should by no means invent may have the appearance, under a suspicious eye, of having emerged, full-blown from an overworked imagination.

Which all reminds me that the fellow who won the national Liar's Contest last year got his prize-winning lie out of a book.

Yours for more fictitious fiction,
EDGAR E. PIPER.

New York City.

In the September first edition of *Adventure* there appeared in the Camp-Fire section a poem written by a Mr. J. W. Edgar of Bayside, Halifax County, Nova Scotia, entitled "I Wish't I Was One to Lie." In every verse there was a marked similarity to the enclosed "A Nautical Extravaganza." I have also enclosed the flyleaf of the book in which it was printed. I think that it's a downright shame that a man can copy a well-known poem and have it edited in a well-known magazine—and get away with it, too!

Trusting that you can and will do something about this, I am

Very truly yours,
NEILL MEGAW.

I HAVE written to Mr. Edgar, and his explanation of the coincidence should be interesting to all of us.

As for coincidences, only last week we received a good war story bearing the name of C. Theyson, Santa Monica, California. It was very much like a story

written by Guy Empey that appeared as "The Firing Squad" in the book "Over the Top."

Hereafter I am going to mention these matters as they come along.

CLYDE WANTLAND joins our Writers' Brigade in this issue, and sends this message to the Camp-Fire from San Antonio, Texas:

I write a little fiction once in a while but I never had nerve enough to put a Ben Thompson in a fiction story because, in the first place, an editor wouldn't believe him true to anything that ever lived; and, in the second place, if the editor would believe it, his readers would rise up en masse and ask him what was he drinking when he printed that wild yarn?

But Ben Thompson lived. He was born and he was reared or raised and he died. And, in between the borning and the dying he did things. A neighbor of mine right here in San Antonio, (Ed Vance) was a United States Deputy Marshal in those days. He knew Ben. He was with Ben the day Ben and King Fisher got killed here on Soledad Street and Main Plaza. Ed Vance tells me that all I have heard about Ben Thompson was correct—so far as it went; but Ben went further than any story.

I am intrigued with Ben and his life for two reasons: He hated pimps. He killed them like vermin where he found them. Any man living from a woman was a red flag to Ben. He killed six or eight of that sort. In the next place, Ben Thompson never killed a helpless man. Read my story. He killed armed men. He shot from the front. He won gun battles.

Lastly, I like Ben Thompson because he was a newspaperman. He was a reporter. He died a reporter. The only difference between Ben and reporters like myself is—Ben went through with his ideas. I have ranged here and there and yon and fro on the earth. I have met vermin that needed killing. I didn't kill them. Ben did. I like him. He did the things I wanted to do but didn't have the nerve. His death was tragic. Had Ben been given a Chinaman's chance—well, King Fisher, who died with him, was, by long odds and general esteem, the fastest and deadliest gunman that ever ranged these parts. Two men like Ben Thompson and King Fisher don't die in a fair fight by themselves. They were dry-gulched.

I don't want to advance Ben Thompson as a hero. Readers may get the wrong idea. But I do want to put him on record here as a man who hated pimps and killed them; as a reporter who had ideas and carried them out; as a man who drank too much whisky; and as the daddy of the shoulder holster. That was always the ace up his sleeve. Many men died because they thought that Ben wasn't armed. They looked to his hip. That was the wrong place to look on Ben.

The editor wants something about me. There isn't anything to write about that subject. I was born in the Ozarks. I was raised in the Indian Territory. I did a stretch in the army (1917-20) I came to San Antonio because I wanted to. I can go back to the Ozarks if I want to. I can go anywhere the United States flag flies. I am a citizen—and I had rather be able to say that than to say anything that ever fell from the lips of man. And I sure hate a pimp and I like Ben Thompson.

ARTHUR O. FRIEL gives us some sidelights on his novelette, "The Raiders."

It is hardly my custom to glorify outlawry, and I have no intention of doing so now. The majority of outlaws, here and elsewhere, have been only cheap desperadoes. But among outlaws, as among in-laws, there are exceptions. Especially in Latin America, where more than one decent *hombre* ruined by slimy *politicos* has fought back in the only way possible—and thereby, of course, outlawed himself and all his followers.

In Venezuela and the adjacent Colombia can be found outlaws or rebels varying from low-lived "gorillas" to high-grade guerrillas of the Halçon type. And the audacious El Halçon himself is no shadowy fictional character. On the contrary, he is a composite of *two* such men, both of whom are, so far as I know, still very much alive. Both are Venezuelans; both implacable enemies of certain government officials; both quixotic, temperamental, deadly fighters, but as rigid in their code of honor as any of our own old-time Southerners. For instance:

While camping in the Orinoco bush, one of these "Halçones" saw a certain governor, hated by every one, journeying down the river on a *piragua*, within easy rifle range. His men wanted to shoot the official. Halçon forbade it, saying: "I have not notified that fellow that I will kill him. And I am no assassin." So no shot was fired. The governor passed on, totally oblivious of his danger.

Incidentally, that governor later went down

the big river again in chains, to try to defend himself before Juan Vincente Gomez, dictator of Venezuela, on charges of instigating a particularly atrocious murder for his own pecuniary benefit. Gomez gives his governors a long rope, and some of them literally get away with murder—for a while. But when he's convinced that they *are* murderers he yanks that rope tight, and there are new governors.

Strictly speaking, there are only two governors in Venezuela: those of the Territorios of Amazonas and Delta-Amacuro. The rulers of the twenty States down there are technically presidents, each supreme in his own State. But the local boys consider them governors, just as they consider Juan Vincente Gomez to be President, no matter who nominally holds the Presidency. So I have called these subordinate rulers governors in order to sidestep confusion.

I have also taken one slight liberty with geography. There is no town of Guayabal on the middle Orinoco. The real town which I have here described happens to be at a different part of the river; and, rather than fake it, I've just moved it and changed its name. Otherwise it's authentic. I was there—ragged, partly crippled, and apparently busted after a tough time in the real back bush; and what I've said about its population is, if anything, an understatement.

Appearances count, down there as up here. Ordinarily a foreign visitor to those countries is safer from the army or police than are the natives, so long as he looks and acts like a *señor* and minds his own business. This is particularly true in Venezuela, where the feeling toward North Americans is generally more friendly than in some other places I've seen. But circumstances alter cases. There are some Venezuelan outlaws and some in-laws (including some officers or officials) who hate the guts of any Northerner; and if appearances are against him these Anglophobes will make things plenty tough. Which same applies to plenty of other countries too, including the European.

The machete method of execution is particularly popular on the middle and upper Orinoco; partly because it saves expensive cartridges, partly because it gratifies the innate savagery of semi-Indian, semi-Spanish people who, if of higher type, would live in better parts of that country. The technique is to tie the victim to a tree and swing the machete at his throat. If he takes it with his chin up he's through; but he spurts blood in spectacular quantity. If he instinctively ducks his head to protect his throat the blade shears off part of his face. If he still yanks his head around, the following strokes . . . Oh well, I'll stop there.

Anyway, it's been done, plenty of times, in that section of the Orinoco. And the things done by our El Halçon and his gang have also been done, and plenty more, by the living Hawk and his outfit. And possibly you may hear more about them *mañana.* (A very convenient word, *mañana*—meaning tomorrow or some other time, maybe next year, or maybe not.) Meanwhile, *hasta luego!*

THAT debate about the fur trade—is it just another cut-and-dried business procedure nowadays, or still a glamorous and colorful function of the Far North?—gets new light from H.S.M. Kemp, of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan.

Regarding the Samuel Alexander White-Anonymous Writer scrap . . . how's chances to get in on it?

I've sold considerable Northern fiction, so can quite appreciate Mr. White's side of the case; I've also read some terrific bilge in fiction of the North and am, therefore, heartily in sympathy with Mr. Anonymous.

I spent fifteen years down North, part time with the H.B.C., a greater part time with Revillon Freres (the "French Company" and the H.B.C.'s equally powerful rival), and a season or two in the teepees of the Crees, trapping with 'em and eating their smoked meat and fish. Incidentally, I picked up their language to read it and write it; and whenever any one speaks of the North, it is like referring to my home town.

But when Mr. White says: "Of course we all know . . . that the picturesque phase of the fur-trade passed when the H.B.C. surrendered its charter," I r'ar up to say that here's one that don't know anything of the sort. The mere surrendering of a grant cannot destroy the picturesque; and I maintain that the operations of the H.B.C. or Revillons, are just as picturesque back o' beyond today as they ever were. Anyhow, just what is the meaning of "picturesque"? I take it to be the glamour that surrounds the trader and his work. And the glamour is still there. I grant that the airplane has come into its own; that the "kicker" has, to a great extent, supplanted the paddle; and that the caterpillar tractor takes care of a lot of work that the dog-team had to do. But get up around the Churchill River, and you'll find the fur-trade being carried on pretty much as it was a hundred years ago. In the days that Mr. White refers to, the H.B.C.

had to fight the North West Company. Today, it has its hands full with Revillons', with a score of up-and-coming concerns, as well as droves of fly-by-plane cash fur-buyers. The traders nowadays don't smoke up their opposition, but they fight them just as determinedly. A few years ago when I was in Revillons' service, the heads of the two big concerns got together and decreed that the hatchet be buried, that each bear the other's burdens, and that, generally, an era of brotherly love be brought about. The theory was fine, but the execution of it was a disappointment. Men who had been trained to fly at each other's throat (in business-hours, at least) couldn't just get the hang of the new Utopian idea. I think of the Winter trips, with the harness-bells stripped from the dogs so that a midnight start might not carry to the opposition ears; of long days and short camps; of snowshoe-galled feet and frozen-footed dogs—all to reach an Indian trapping camp, secure the fur and wipe out a debt before the other feller got there first. And in the Spring, around honey-combed ice or through the leads—sixty straight hours on the paddle; greasy portages in the rain; wet to the hide; trickery, camouflage, anything that came along. If glamour is the stuff that books are made of, the glamour sho' am dere!

Go down North, and you'll still find the Yorkboat crew with its whooping, yelling galley slaves. You'll still find canoe-crews hauling in bales of trade goods or hauling out bales of fur—reckless, great-hearted Nitchies all but killing themselves for two-fifty a day and found. You'll still find dog-teams in trading strings weaving along the frozen rivers and lakes with their big oak toboggans. The Indian trapper now totes a high-powered rifle instead of a trade-gun, but he's the same grinning, stoical, fatalistic cuss that made the H.B.C. what it is today. Your low-ceilinged trading posts remain until their foundations rot and have to be replaced by lumber buildings; but inside you will recognize the same mixed perfume of leather and tea, spices and bacon that must have plucked at the nostrils of the first H.B. Governor to come West.

I guess that's all; except for this beaver-dam stuff. I've seen scores of 'em. Some were solid as concrete; some more loosely built. There's one here in Prince Albert National Park that I'd just love to see Mr. Anonymous' draft-horse walk across. This is mainly built of spruce and poplar saplings. It contains no "rubbish"; but if Mr. Anonymous can run across it himself without going through and breaking a leg, his place is on a tight-wire in a three-ring show.

No need for me to go back ten years to remember the best yarns you've printed. Was a long stretch when none of 'em were anything to brag about. Recently, however . . . well, you know. Put me down for "Office Upstairs", a short-short that you printed last Winter. That hit me a wallop. And you've certainly to wade through a lots of mss. before you beat S. Omar Barker's "Ol' Star" in the current issue.

I WANT to thank all these comrades for their recent letters, and regret I haven't space to print many of them.

John H. Wigmore, Chicago; K. W. Oppermann, Milwaukee; Tedy Foley, Barranquilla, Colombia, South America; T. J. Gridley, Holyoke, Mass.; H. R. Laudermills, Wichita, Kansas; M. M. Allen, New York City; E. C. Lester, Bloxwich, Staffordshire, England; William Hart, Tallman, N. Y.; Howard Shenk, Sanborn, N. Y.; R. W. Roberts, Long Beach, California; Frank Liebler, Brooklyn, N. Y.; Tom Q. Smallwood, Oakland, California; T. Kearns, Berkeley, California; T. H. Frazer, Jr., Chin Lee, Arizona (112 miles, he writes, from the newsstand); F. A. Partridge, Placerville, California; Leo Edward Schottland, Kiamesha Lake, New York; Rev. John R. Henry, Rye, New York; James Wilson, Columbus, Ohio; George J. Little, Paterson, N. J.; Robert J. Icks, Stevens Point, Wisconsin; P. L. Echols, Dallas, Texas; William F. Radecke, Tulsa, Oklahoma; Evart G. Routzahn, New York City; Al Baumann, Deming, New Mexico; R. W. Summers, Morgantown, West Virginia; Albert E. Osterlag, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey; H. J. Apps, Richmond, Surrey, England; Ellwood Vaughan, Seattle, Washington; R. W. Bartley, Tucson, Arizona; W. E. Brice and William Crowe, Juneau, Alaska.

OUR last issue—the twenty-fifth anniversary—was on sale a full month. So will this one be. *Adventure* is now a monthly magazine.

Why?

There are several reasons. Two of them are two of the four readers of *Adventure* I've talked to—I've talked to others, of course—but these men were complete strangers. I saw them reading *Adventure* on trains, and watched my

chance to get a vacant seat beside them, asked for a match or the time, and casually remarked, "I see you read *Adventure.*"

That started them off. Each one of them said:

"Do you read it?"

"Yes," I said. "Read it from cover to cover."

I'm glad to say all four of them liked *Adventure,* and to not one of them did I say that I was editor or hint I was in any way connected; rather I went in for some criticism, to draw them out. Editors don't get many chances like that. Most readers know when they're talking to editors. There was no matter of politeness involved.

All four men were intelligent and seemed to be fixed fairly well with this world's goods. Two of them were reading current issues, one was reading the previous issue—we were on a twice-a-month basis then—and the other man was reading the issue before that. That bothered me, because they all considered themselves regular readers, and yet for two of the four I was wasting at least half of my time in getting out a magazine.

In roundabout way I got them on that subject. One of them played a lot of golf, the other read a number of books, mostly on science. They generally read *Adventure* clear through, and just hadn't had time to finish the copies in hand, so hadn't bought new ones. That was sensible of them, certainly, but no editor likes to hear of it.

We checked around in other directions, and concluded that many of us who consider that we do a lot of reading don't do as much as we think we do. There are plenty of other recreations, hobbies, or even worries, that sometimes get in the way.

Appearing once a month practically every issue of *Adventure* will be bought by all four of those men. Naturally this theory works out on a broader scale.

Another reason.

Adventure has a large body of readers who never miss a single issue. No fiction magazine can boast such a faithful rain-or-shine following as we have round our Camp-Fire. We think there are perhaps fifty thousands of you who never miss a single copy, and if you are one of them, I have to say to you I'm sorry we're making this change. We may be taking something from you. But there aren't enough of you.

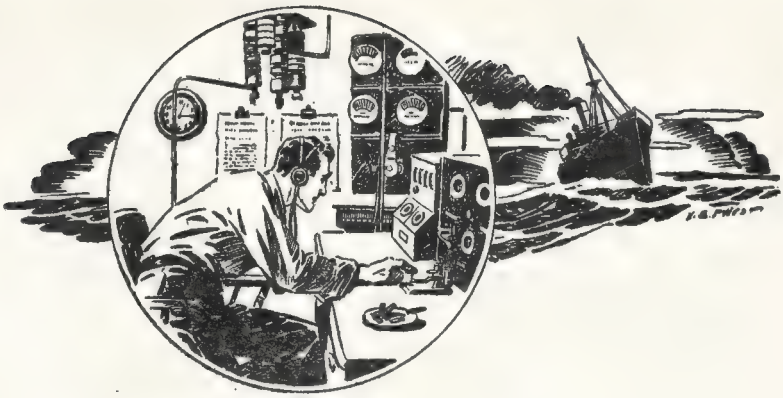
Adventure pays well for stories. It is an expensive magazine to produce. We plan to turn a lot of our part-time regular readers into every-issue regular readers, and this change will do it.

Consider this also: if you took any two issues of *Adventure,* picked out the best yarns and made up one issue from them, wouldn't that be a pretty good magazine?

Probably I could announce this change in a high-flown way, giving some pompous-sounding but in reality tinny reasons why this represents an advance in the publishing art, bunk, bunk, and bunk. But there never has been that kind of talk around the Camp-Fire, and we won't start it now.

It's no publishing advance. Neither is it a retreat. All subscriptions will be automatically extended.

We're doing it for good business reasons. We're satisfied we've made some progress in the last troubled year and a half. When all four of those men bought the same issue of *Adventure,* we made a profit, though not large. When two of them dropped out for an issue, we had a loss, also not large. We're trying to establish a steady margin between income and outgo. You'll understand this talk. Likely you are doing the same thing yourself in trying to push that depression into the past. —H. B.



ASK ADVENTURE

information you can't get elsewhere

LEARNING the Mississip from the mud up.

Request:—1. Are there any steamboat lines on the upper Missouri River operating during the navigable season?

2. If so, what lines?

3. About how many boats do they operate and to what ports?

4. How long is the average navigable season?

5. Would you advise a boy with the ambition to be a river pilot to get his experience on the Missouri, particularly the upper Missouri, instead of on another western river if he would like to go into barge service on the Missouri?

—W. G. SEMANS, Mitchell, S. D.

Reply by Mr. Joseph Mills Hanson:—There was a line of small gasoline-driven boats plying from Bismarck, N. D., until a few years ago. This was the Benton Packet Co. My recent inquiry, made on your behalf, discloses that this line has gone out of business. I find, further, that there is no line of steamers, or even single boats other than a few ferryboats, now operating on the Missouri River above Kansas City, except the light draft excursion steamboat, "Valley Queen," which plies between Kansas City and Sioux City, Ia.

If you want to "learn the river" as a pilot, engineer, or master, get in touch with the U. S. Local Inspector, Bureau of Navigation and Steamboat Inspection, Dubuque, Iowa. He can give you information about the Federal Barge Line which operates a line of towboats and barges on the Mississippi between St. Louis, Mo., and St. Paul. Minn. Its headquarters are at Dubuque, and if you could, it would be well to go to Dubuque before the season of navigation opens in the spring, about March, to make yourself known on the boats and let them know you desire to learn the business. It might also be well to get in touch with your representative in Congress, or one of the United States Senators, and get some political backing, as this is a Government-owned freight line.

There are also a few privately owned lines of boats operating out of St. Louis. The largest is the Streckfus line, which operates four of the old Diamond Jo Line boats and has just added a new one. It operates, I believe, between St. Louis and St. Paul. The address is—Streckfus Steamers, Inc., Foot of Washington St., St. Louis, Mo. Other St. Louis lines are as follows:

Eagle Packet Co., Foot of Pine St.

Mississippi Valley Barge Line, 408 Pine St., Room 428.

New St. Louis Calhoun Packet Co., Foot of Pine St.

Standard Unit Navigation Co., 408 Pine St., Room 428.

Also the main headquarters of the Federal Barge Line is located in St. Louis at the foot of North Market St.

If you should learn navigation with any of the above lines it would, of course, qualify you for work with a barge line on the Missouri in the future, if or when such a line may be established.

TWO experts come to the aid of a man after pearls.

Request:—A friend and myself intend to sail for South Sea waters in the near future.

We shall sail our own boat and intend to follow pearling extensively.

I should greatly appreciate your telling me the methods used in the waters near you. Is the use of a diving suit permissible? Is a license required, if so, what is the fee? What are the seasons?

—CIMARRON HATHAWAY, Los Angeles, Calif.

Reply by Mr. William McCreadie, Suva, Fiji:—I am glad you propose to enjoy a cruise among the Islands. First of all, never start out among the Pacific Islands south of the Line between the months of November and April, the "hurricane months," not that we are always getting hurricanes, but these months are dangerous, especially for a sailing craft with no auxiliary. An auxiliary engine will be of very great value in entering any reef passage as the currents are strong and at times dangerous. At the same time many purely sail craft roam round the Islands.

As to diving, one can use a diver's suit under local regulation. It all depends where you propose to dive. In all French territory you must obtain a pearl license costing you one thousand francs and known as a "license to deal in pearls." This is obtainable at Papeete, in Tahiti, and is I understand available in all the French islands including the Marquesas. In New Caledonian waters you get the licenses at Noumea. The French Government has introduced a closed season owing to the depredations of diving outfits. So far as I can discover there is little money to be made now in pearl diving as most beds are worked out. It means really a gamble if one strikes a small bed worthwhile. The Tuamotus are said to have yielded large quantities of pearls but are worked out pretty well. Many small pearls are found around the Raratongan or Cook group. There is so little in pearl hunting that we have lost interest in the subject these days in the Islands.

Reply by Mr. T. L. Mills, Feilding, New Zealand:—With your own boat and a determination to follow the pursuit of the pearl extensively I should advise you to make for New Guinea. There is no pearling done in my region. Fishing for pearls is regulated by legislation (Australia) by the Fisheries Ordinance and Regulations, copies of which can be obtained from the Prime Minister's Office, Canberra, Australia, at the price of one dollar. Your vessel must be licensed to go after the elusive gem. The license fee is two and a half dollars per person and the same fee for a boat not exceeding two tons burden—under ten tons five dollars. Most of the pearl fishing in New Guinea waters is done adjacent to the Admiralty Islands. You can get the licenses from the Collector of Customs at Rabaul, the capital of New Guinea, which is under mandate of Australia from the League of Nations.

THIS spring the American Museum of Natural History published Mr. Pope's book, "The Reptiles of China," a narrative account of the herpetological field work of the Central Asiatic Expeditions in China.

Here's something on American snakes.

Request:—1. Which, if any, of our American snakes reproduce by bearing live young and which lay eggs?

2. Have you heard of any really authentic cases in which rattlesnakes and bull snakes have interbred and produced young? If so, a description of the cross would be appreciated.

3. Do some snakes, in time of danger, swallow their young?

I am deeply interested in herpetology, and have had a little experience with a few of our native snakes. I have often heard that a rattler could not strike more than two-thirds of its own length, but have seen several which struck a few inches more than their length; although their aim was not very accurate. Whenever I tell this, most people think I am trying to kid them. Have you seen this happen?

Could you advise me as to a market for rattlesnake (Montana species) oil, venom, or skins or for live reptiles?

—FRANK W. GARRICK, Great Falls, Mont.

Reply by Mr. Clifford H. Pope:—Nearly all of the groups of snakes inhabiting the United States reproduce by laying eggs. There are three notable exceptions: the garter snakes, the water snakes *(Natrix)*, and the pit-vipers (rattlesnakes, water moccasin, and copperhead). Each of these viviparous groups is made up of a good number of species or kinds, however.

I have never heard of a rattlesnake crossing with a bull snake. Any herpetologist would be extremely interested in such an event, so if you ever hear of a successful mating between these unrelated snakes please be sure to let me know.

The question of whether snakes swallow their young to protect them from danger is an old and difficult one. I do not believe that they ever do but I know herpetologists who disagree with me. There are about two thousand kinds of snakes on this earth and many of them have surprising habits so it is not

exactly scientific to flatly deny that such a habit exists. Technical literature certainly does not contain well-authenticated descriptions of such a procedure while there are many ways of explaining how such a belief might arise. Snakes commonly eat young of other species and sometimes even their own young. Also it is easy to see how one could be fooled by killing or cutting open a female on the point of giving birth to living young. In such a case the young might literally wriggle out and crawl away. A study of the literature on snakes would show that the vast majority of references to or discussions of the habit in question occur in the popular section. In other words it is the untrained observer who "sees" it happen. I have observed snakes on four continents but remain unconvinced.

The statement that a snake strikes no more than two-thirds of its length is only meant to describe the average length of the stroke, not its absolute or possible length. Under favorable conditions many snakes can do better than that as you say. The statement is chiefly meant to convey the truth that snakes do not spring from the ground as many people are prone to believe.

I am sorry not to be able to tell you of a market for rattlesnakes or their by-products. You might be able to sell a few to zoos.

THE Arabian tent hasn't changed in centuries as much, nor as often, as our pup tents.

Request:—I am very much interested in Palestine, its people and customs. I am hoping to assemble enough data to build models of some of their homes and I would like to get the following information:

The tents like Abraham lived in—approximately what size was in common use, of what were they built and what would make a satisfactory substitute for it if that material is not available? How were they put together? Could you help me to get the information for building a model of one?

I have several photographs of these tents, but they are not clear enough for me to make a model.

—W. E. Little, Dallas Center, Iowa.

Reply by Captain Herbert W. Eades:—The ordinary tent of the Arab nomads of modern times is a comparatively spacious ridged structure, averaging from twenty to twenty-five feet in length, but sometimes reaching as much as forty feet. Its covering usually consists of a thick felt of black goat hair or sometimes of alternate stripes of black and white disposed horizontally. The ridge or roof is supported by nine poles in sets of three, the central set being loftier than those at each end, whereby a slope outward is formed which helps to carry off the rain. The average height at the center is seven feet, and at the sides, five feet, and the cloths at the side are so attached that they can be easily removed, the sheltered end being always left open. Internally the tent is separated by a partition into two sections, that reserved for the women also containing the cooking utensils and the food.

In ancient Assyrian sculptures discovered by Layard at Nineveh the form of tent and the tent furnishings are similar to those which still prevail in the East, so it appears that then, as now, it was a custom to pitch tents within the walls of a city. It is probable that the tents used by Abraham and his people were of this same type.

BEGINNER'S luck—or maybe it was the plug.

Request:—I have recently started bait-casting and to celebrate my first fish on a plug, I hooked a nice five-pound black bass. Naturally I feel pretty swelled up about it.

Costs of mounting such a fish would flatten my pocketbook, so I have decided to preserve only the head. Will you please give me directions and necessary materials for such operation?

I see you you are also an authority on dogs. How can I stop my Samoyede from barking at every little thing without ruining his watchdog characteristics?

—J. Trutor, Etna, Penna.

Reply by Ozark Ripley:—As you want to mount just the head of the fish, dry it with stick holding open its jaws to natural size, in the sun. When thoroughly dry, give it a light coat of shellac. After shellac is dry, follow with a light coat of valspar. Repeat about every two years. But never put on an extremely heavy coat of varnish, or it will blister and crack.

As for stopping your dog from barking at everything, run a strap from collar to one around foreleg. He will quit the habit soon.

SUNKEN treasure, this fish that got away, that fellow you once knew . . . and your word is as good as mine!

Request:—I have been approached by certain parties with a view of investing in a

treasure expedition to recover a treasure supposed to have been lost by the Bobadilla fleet. Would you be so kind as to send me any information you have in regard to this treasure?

—Hugh Wright, Esq., New York, N. Y.

Reply by Commander Edward Ellsberg, U.S.N.R.:—In my opinion, no authentic information regarding the supposed treasure of Bobadilla exists except perhaps among the official records in Spain.

Bobadilla, recalled governor of Hispaniola, was wrecked off the northeast coast of that island, now Haiti, on his way back to Spain in 1502. The legend is, that fearing royal displeasure on his return, he was carrying with him a considerable treasure with which to appease the Spanish monarchs, and that while the treasure was lost in the wreck, Bobadilla himself was saved. According to promoters this treasure ranges from a billion dollars down to a paltry few millions.

Having due regard to the facts that neither Haiti nor the adjacent islands produce gold or silver in any quantity, that Columbus himself from these islands never obtained enough treasure to avoid dying in dire poverty, and that the wreck occurred within ten years of the discovery of America, before the real flow of gold and silver from Mexico and Peru started, I am inclined to believe that with his ship lost and no means of checking up, the legend grew out of Bobadilla's efforts to square himself back in Spain for his misdeeds.

You will find some discussion in "Doubloons" by Driscoll. An old account by Peter Martyr also discusses the case. Cotton Mather's biography of Sir William Phipps also mentions it.

THE unsuccessful search for the Krueger expedition—as told in the official report.

Request:—I was reading in Gordon Hayes' latest book "The Conquest of the North Pole" an interesting but brief history about the Royal Canadian Mounted Police patrol's search after the missing Krueger expedition.

I should like to know if anything in more detail is published about those patrols?

—Hugo Levin, Chicago, Ill.

Reply by Mr. Herbert Patrick Lee:—Up to now there has been no definite information regarding the fate of Dr. Krueger's expedition. I will quote you from Commissioner MacBrien's report of the patrol made by members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police from the Ellesmere Island post:

"During the winter 1931-32, patrols were made from Bache Peninsula in search of the Krueger expedition. Eskimos from Greenland assisted in the main search and the long patrol was carried out by Reg. No. 6316, Corporal H. W. Stallworthy, and Reg. No. 10196, Constable R. W. Hamilton. These members of the force and seven Greenland Eskimos, with eight sleighs and one hundred and twenty-five dogs left Bache Peninsula on March 20, 1932. This patrol later divided into two separate parties. Corporal Stallworthy, with three Eskimos, encircled Axel Heberg Island and was successful in locating a written record left by Dr. Krueger on April 24, 1930, on the most northerly point of that island.

"Constable Hamilton and party proceeded to the west, visited Cape Southwest on Axel Heberg Island, and continued to Amund Ringnes and Cornwall Islands from which points they returned to Bache Peninsula via Mackinson Inlet.

"These patrols encountered extremely bad ice conditions, and owing to the scarcity of game, particularly polar bear, they were forced to travel for days without obtaining dog feed. During a long spell of severe cold weather they had to resort to killing some of their dogs in order to feed the others. Twenty-nine dogs were sacrificed to that purpose.

"Had it not been for a break in the weather, and the fact that a few seals were obtained and that a cache of provisions had been established at Cape Southwest, these patrols would have lost all their dogs through starvation, and would have been subjected to the most severe hardships.

"Corporal Stallworthy's patrol returned to Bache Peninsula on May 23, 1932, after traveling approximately fourteen hundred miles, and Constable Hamilton returned on May 7, 1932, after traveling nine hundred miles.

"Owing to traveling conditions encountered, the patrols were unable to visit Meighen Island and Isaachsen Island which was part of the plan discussed previously by the late Inspector Joy and Corporal Stallworthy.

"From the route taken by the missing party, it is the opinion of Corporal Stallworthy that the Krueger Expedition perished during the winter of 1931-32, somewhere in the vicinity of Meighen Island and Isaachsen Island."

The Commissioner praised Constable Arthur Monro, who while remaining at the detachment at Bache Peninsula had his part to play in securing dog feed and building caches.

I am interested personally in the fate of Krueger and his companions. I was one of the original police expedition there in 1922 and spent two years at Craig Harbor, to which point the detachment at Bache has now been removed.

THE ASK ADVENTURE SERVICE is free, provided self-addressed envelope and FULL POSTAGE for reply are enclosed. Correspondents writing to or from foreign countries must enclose International Reply Coupons, which are exchangeable for stamps of any country in the International Postal Union.

Send each question *direct* to the expert in charge of the section whose field covers it. He will reply by mail. **Do Not** send questions to this magazine. Be definite; explain your case sufficiently to guide the expert you question. The magazine does not assume any responsibility.

No Reply will be made to requests for partners, for financial backing or for employment.

★*(Enclose addressed envelope with International Reply Coupon.)*

ASK ADVENTURE EXPERTS

SPORTS AND HOBBIES

Archery—EARL B. POWELL, care of *Adventure.*

Baseball—FREDERICK LIEB, 250 Bronxville Rd., Bronxville, N. Y.

Camping—PAUL M. FINK, Jonesboro, Tenn.

Boxing—CAPT. JEAN V. GROMBACH, 113 W. 57th St., N. Y. C.

Canoeing: *paddling, sailing, cruising, regattas*—EDGAR S. PERKINS, 161 W. Harrison St., Chicago, Ill.

Coins: *and medals*—HOWLAND WOOD, American Numismatic Society, Broadway at 156th St., N. Y. C.

Dogs—JOHN B. THOMPSON, care of *Adventure.*

Fencing—CAPT. JEAN V. GROMBACH, 113 W. 57th St., N. Y. C.

First Aid—DR. CLAUDE P. FORDYCE, care of *Adventure.*

Fishing: *salt and fresh water; fly and bait casting; bait; camping outfits; fishing trips*—JOHN B. THOMPSON, (Ozark Ripley), care of *Adventure.*

Football—JOHN B. FOSTER, American Sports Pub. Co., 45 Rose St., N. Y. C.

Globe-trotting and vagabonding—ROBERT SPIERS-BENJAMIN, 1177 East 15th St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Health Building Activities, Hiking — DR. CLAUDE P. FORDYCE, care of *Adventure.*

Horses: *care, breeding, training of horses in general; hunting; jumping; and polo; horses of old and new West*—MAJOR THOMAS H. DAMERON, 1709 Berkley Ave., Pueblo, Colo.

Motor Boating—GERALD T. WHITE, Montville, N. J.

Motor Camping—MAJOR CHAS. G. PERCIVAL, M.D., 152 W. 65th St., New York City.

Motorcycling—*regulations, mechanics, racing*—CHARLES M. DODGE, 108 Winthrop Rd., Brookline, Mass.

Mountain Climbing—THEODORE S. SOLOMONS, Yosemite, Calif.

Old Songs—ROBERT FROTHINGHAM, 995 Pine St., San Francisco, Calif.

Old-Time Sailoring—CHAS. H. HALL, 446 Ocean Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Oriental Magic and Effects—JULIEN PROSKAUER, 148 Lafayette St., New York, N. Y.

Rifles, Pistols, Revolvers: *foreign and American*—DONEGAN WIGGINS, R. F. D. No. 3, Box 69, Salem, Oregon.

Shotguns: *foreign and American makes; wing shooting*—JOHN B. THOMPSON, care of *Adventure.*

★**Skiing and Snowshoeing**—W. H. PRICE, 3436 Mance St., Montreal, Quebec.

Small Boating: *skiffs, outboard, small launch, river and lake cruising*—RAYMOND S. SPEARS, Inglewood, Calif.

Soccer—MR. BEDA VON BERCHEM, care of *Adventure.*

Stamps—DR. H. A. DAVIS, The American Philatelic Society, 3421 Colfax Avenue, Denver, Colo.

Swimming—LOUIS DEB. HANDLEY, 115 West 11th St., N. Y. C.

Swords: *spears, pole arms and armor*—CAPT. R. E. GARDNER, 1354 N. 4th St., Columbus, Ohio.

Tournament Fly and Bait Casting—H. B. STANWOOD, East Sullivan, Maine.

Track—JACKSON SCHOLZ, Box 163, Jenkintown, Pa.

Woodcraft—PAUL M. FINK, Jonesboro, Tenn.

Wrestling—CHARLES B. CRANFORD, School of Education, New York University, Washington Square, New York, N. Y.

Yachting—A. R. KNAUER, 2722 E. 75th Pl., Chicago, Ill.

SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL SUBJECTS

Anthropology: *American; north of the Panama Canal; customs, dress, architecture, pottery and decorative arts, weapons and implements, fetishism, social divisions*—ARTHUR WOODWARD, Los Angeles Museum, Exposition Park, Los Angeles, Calif.

Automobiles and Aircraft Engines: *design, operation and maintenance*—EDMUND B. NEIL, care of *Adventure.*

Aviation: *airplanes, airships, airways and landing fields, contests, aero clubs, insurance, laws, licenses, operating data, schools, foreign activities, publications, parachute gliders*—MAJOR FALK HARMEL, 709 Longfellow St., Washington, D. C.

Big Game Hunting: *guides and equipment*—ERNEST W. SHAW, South Carver, Mass.

Entomology: *insects and spiders; venomous and disease-carrying insects*—DR. S. W. FROST, Arendtsville, Pa.

Ethnology: (*Eskimo*)—VICTOR SHAW, Loring, Alaska.

Forestry: *in the United States; national forests of the Rocky Mountain States*—ERNEST W. SHAW, South Carver, Mass.

Tropical Forestry: *tropical forests and products*—WM. R. BARBOUR, Chapel Hill, N. C.

Fur Farming—FRED L. BOWDEN, 104 Fairview Ave., Binghamton, New York.

Herpetology: *reptiles and amphibians*—CLIFFORD H. POPE, care of *Adventure.*

Marine Architecture: *ship modeling*—CHAS. H. HALL, 446 Ocean Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Mining: *territory anywhere in North America. Mining law, prospecting outfitting; any mineral, metallic or nonmetallic*—VICTOR SHAW, Loring, Alaska.

Motor Vehicles: *operation, legislative restrictions and traffic*—EDMUND B. NEIL, care of *Adventure.*

Ornithology: *birds; their habits and distribution*—DAVIS QUINN, 3548 Tryon Ave., Bronx, N. Y.

Photography: *outfitting, work in out-of-the-way places, general information*—PAUL L. ANDERSON, 36 Washington St., East Orange, N. J.

Precious and semi-precious stones: *cutting and polishing of gem materials; technical information*—F. J. ESTERLIN, 901-902 Shreve Bldg., 210 Post Road, San Francisco, Calif.

Radio: *telegraphy, telephony, history, broadcasting, apparatus, invention, receiver construction, portable sets*—DONALD MCNICOL, 132 Union Road, Roselle Park, N. J.

Railroads: *in the United States, Mexico and Canada*—R. T. NEWMAN, 701 N. Main St., Paris, Ill.

Sawmilling—HAPSBURG LIEBE, care of *Adventure.*

Sunken Treasure: *salvaging and diving*—COMDR. EDWARD ELLSBERG, U. S. N. R., care of *Adventure.*

Taxidermy—SETH BULLOCK, care of *Adventure.*

MILITARY, NAVAL AND POLICE SUBJECTS

Army Matters: *United States and Foreign*—CAPT. GLEN R. TOWNSEND, 5511 Cabanna Ave., St. Louis, Mo.

Federal Investigation Activities: *Secret Service, etc.*—FRANCIS H. BENT, 251 Third St, Fair Haven, N. J.

Navy Matters: *United States and Foreign*—LT. COMDR. VERNON C. BIXBY, U. S. N. (retired), P. O. Box 588, Orlando, Fla.

Royal Canadian Mounted Police—PATRICK LEE, 11 Franklin Pl., Great Neck, Long Is., N. Y.

Police, City and State—FRANCIS H. BENT, 251 Third St., Fair Haven, N. J.

U. S. Coast Guard—COMDR. VERNON C. BIXBY, U.S.N. (ret.), P. O. Box 588, Orlando, Florida.

U. S. Marine Corps—CAPT. F. W. HOPKINS, R. F. D. 1, Box 614, La Canada, Calif.

World War: *strategy, tactics, leaders, armies, participants, historical and political background*—BEDA VON BERCHEM, care of *Adventure*.

GEOGRAPHICAL SUBJECTS

The Sea, Part 1 *British and American waters, ships, seamen, statistics, record, oceans, waterways, seas, islands. Atlantic and Indian Oceans, Cape Horn, Magellan Straits, Mediterranean Sea, Islands and Coasts.*—COMDR. EDWARD ELLSBERG, U.S.N.R., care of *Adventure*. ★**2** *Antarctica*—F. LEONARD MARSLAND, care of The Agent General for Queensland, Queensland House, The Strand, London, W. C. 2, England.

Philippine Islands—BUCK CONNER, Quartzsite, Ariz., care Conner Field.

★**New Guinea**—L. P. B. ARMIT, Port Moresby, Territory Papua, via Sydney, Australia.

★**New Zealand; Cook Island, Samoa**—TOM L. MILLS, *The Feilding Star*, Feilding, New Zealand.

★**Australia and Tasmania**—ALAN FOLEY, 18a Sandridge St., Bondi, Sydney, Australia.

★**South Sea Islands**—WILLIAM MCCREADIE, "Cardross," Suva, Fiji.

Asia, Part 1 ★*Siam, Malay States, Straits Settlements, Java, Sumatra, Dutch East Indies*—V. B. WINDLE, care of *Adventure*. **2** *French Indo-China, Hong Kong, Macao, Tibet, Southern, Eastern and Central China*—SEWARD S. CRAMER, care of *Adventure*. **3** *Northern China and Mongolia*—PAUL H. FRANSON, Bldg. No. 3 Veterans Administration Facility, Minneapolis, Minn. **4** *Japan*—OSCAR E. RILEY, 4 Huntingdon Ave., Scarsdale, N. Y. **5** *Persia, Arabia*—CAPTAIN BEVERLY-GIDDINGS, care of *Adventure*. **6** ★*Palestine*—CAPT. H. W. EADES, 3808 26th Ave., West, Vancouver, B. C.

Africa, Part 1 ★*Egypt, Tunis, Algeria, Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.*—CAPT. H. W. EADES, 3808 26th Ave., West, Vancouver, B. C. **2** *Abyssinia, Italian Somaliland, British Somali Coast Protectorate, Eritrea, Uganda, Tanganyika, Kenya.*—GORDON MAC CREAGH, Box 197, Centerport, Long Island, N. Y. **3** *Tripoli, Sahara, caravans.*—CAPTAIN BEVERLY-GIDDINGS, care of *Adventure*. **4** *Morocco.*—GEORGE E. HOLT, care of *Adventure*. **5** *Sierra Leone to Old Calabar, West Africa, Nigeria.*—N. E. NELSON, 1641 Greenlawn Ave., Akron, Ohio. **6** *Cape Colony, Orange River Colony, Natal, Zululand, Transvaal, and Rhodesia.*—CAPT. F. J. FRANKLIN, Adventure Camp, Simi, Calif. **7** ★*Portuguese East.*—R. G. WARING, Corunna, Ont., Canada. **8** ★*Bechuanaland, Southwest Africa, Angola, Belgian Congo, Egyptian Sudan and French West Africa.*—MAJOR S. L. GLENISTER, 24 Cuba St., Havana, Cuba.

Madagascar—RALPH LINTON, 324 Sterling Hall, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wis.

Europe, Part 1 *Denmark, Germany*—G. I. COLBURN, East Ave., New Canaan, Conn. **2** *The Balkans: Jugoslavia, Rumania, Bulgaria, Albania, Greece and Turkey. The Austrian Succession States: Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary—History, customs, travel.*—BEDA VON BERCHEM, care of *Adventure*.

South America, Part 1 *Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Chile.*—EDGAR YOUNG, care of *Adventure*. **2** *Venezuela, The Guianas, Uruguay, Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil.*—DR. PAUL VANORDEN SHAW, 414 W. 121st St., N. Y. C.

★**West Indies**—JOHN B. LEFFINGWELL, Box 1333, Nueva Gerona, Isle of Pines, Cuba.

Central America—SEYMOUR POND, care of *Adventure*.

Mexico, Part 1 ★*Northern Border States.*—J. W. WHITEAKER, 2903 San Gabriel St., Austin, Tex. **2** *Quintana Roo, Yucatan, Campeche.*—W. RUSSELL SHEETS, 301 Poplar Ave., Takoma Prk., Md. **3** ★*South of line from Tampico to Mazatlan.*—JOHN NEWMAN PAGE, Sureno Carranza 16, Cuautla, Morelos, Mexico.

Newfoundland—C. T. JAMES, Box 2064, St. John's, Newfoundland.

Greenland—*Dog-teams, whaling, Eskimos, etc.*—VICTOR SHAW, Loring, Alaska.

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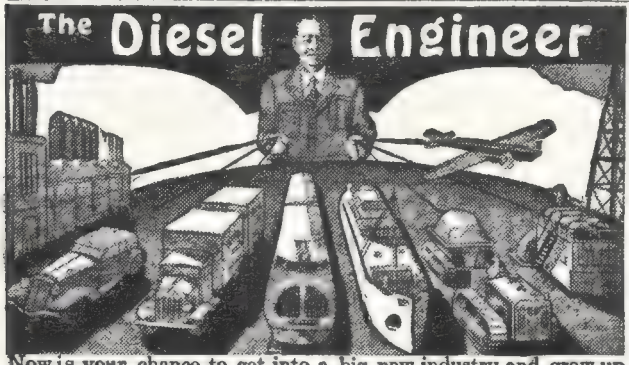

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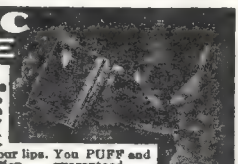

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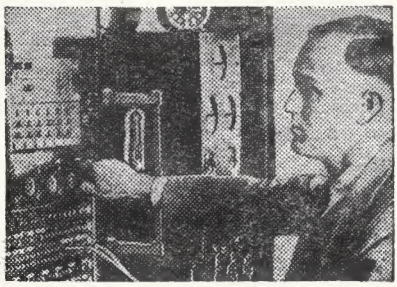

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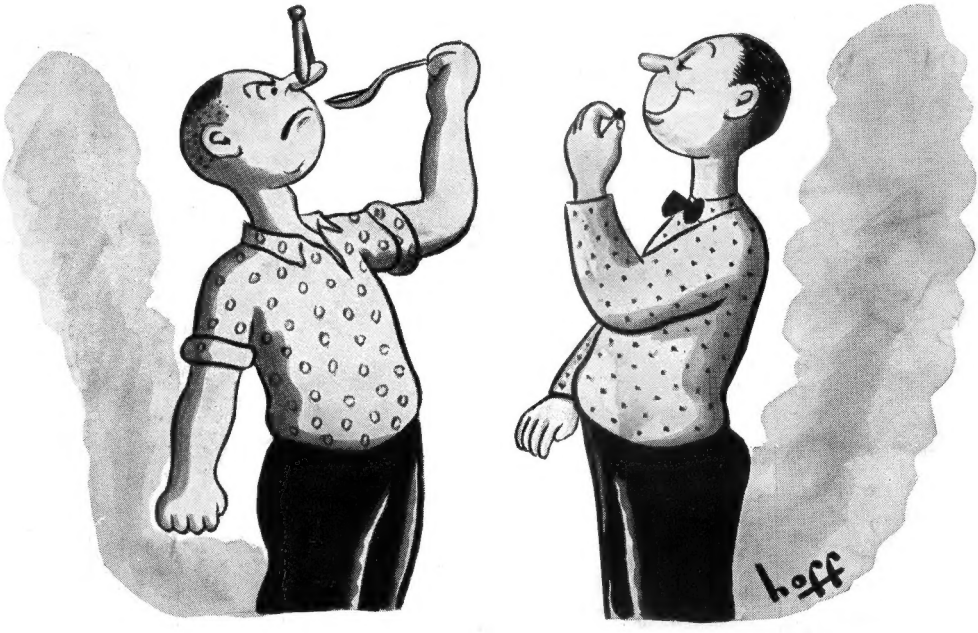

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